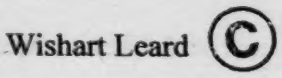
University of Alberta

The rose that grew from concrete
A critical literacy of Inner City High School

by

Diane Jean Wishart Leard 

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Abstract

This dissertation represents a case study of Inner City High School (ICHS) in Edmonton, Alberta. ICHS is a provincially accredited, private, academic and arts based senior high school. The school has struggled to create the opportunity for disenfranchised urban youth to extend the limits of their social reality by examining their experiences through a critical lens. The study used an interpretive hermeneutical process that evolved out of the researcher's understandings developed throughout years of teaching and studying with ICHS students, teachers, and youth workers. Critical theory, together with critical and feminist pedagogy, provides the theoretical underpinnings of the writing. Additionally, hermeneutical action research allows for the voice of the researcher and author to be represented in the writing in conversation with participants and relevant academic writers.

This study illuminates the complexities and uniqueness of educational practice at ICHS. It offers understandings of a population of disenfranchised urban youth who have traditionally been silenced or unheard in schools. As well it suggests alternative approaches to schooling for youth whose needs evolve out of difficult social circumstances. While many of these approaches are applicable to public school settings, alternative programs are available to meet the needs of a disenfranchised urban youth population. Specifically, this research project explored the tensions within the experiences of disenfranchised Aboriginal youth in both integrated and separate school settings. Tensions are also apparent within pedagogical practices that highlight the dissonance between our understandings of youth through a process of objectification in schools and the struggles to decode these same youth through critical practice at ICHS.

This dissertation offers insight into youth as individuals whose subjectivities are informed by interactions and processes of marginalization in public school settings. Popular theater and critical literacy play prominently in this process. The study also informs broader discussions of the sociology of education and critical pedagogy literature.

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To the students, teachers, and youth workers of Inner City High School

The Rose that Grew from Concrete
A Critical Literacy of Inner City High School

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THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE

Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack
in the concrete
Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk
without having feet
Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams
it learned 2 breathe fresh air
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else even cared!

- Tupac Shakur (1999)

Chapter 1: Introduction (setting the stage)

When I first read this poem by Tupac it struck me as being a particularly apt description of Inner City High School (ICHS) in Edmonton. A rose is a climbing plant, one that offers potential for growth. It can be prickly in places, possibly turning away those who don't take the time to notice its more delicate features. It grows out of the dirt and dirt can be, well… dirty. Yet a rose is also fragrant, beautiful, and hopeful. And it can grow in difficult places. So can young people when someone cares to tend to that growth. In this school, the students are disenfranchised. Many are living on the streets when they first arrive at the school, disconnected from families. All are street involved in various ways, through drugs, violence, and negative contact with the law. Here is my story of Inner City High School and those who nurture the development of disenfranchised urban youth through continuous efforts to soften the prickly spots allowing the more delicate features to shine. It is also a story of young people who are learning to breathe fresh air.

I came to this study years ago. I guess I have always been coming to this study, given that it grows out of me. Something attracted me to ICHS from the time I first

became aware of the place, located in the concrete shadows of downtown. It certainly wasn't because of any aesthetic experience. The building is functional at best. It is large, boxy, unattractive and marginally maintained. It is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Or more accurately it is cold in some rooms and hot in others. Being prone to breathing problems, I found the air to be stale. Maybe it's the mouse droppings. But I digress. If it wasn't a physical attractiveness, what was it? Something shone through the gloom. It was people. People working together through drama to tell their stories, stories of pain and suffering yet offering possibilities for better futures if we could understand how our stories, teachers and youth workers, are wrapped up in students' stories. And if we could work together, here was a school that could help disenfranchised young people move forward in their lives.

I consider how our paths are woven together, how the choices I make are reflected in the choices youth make. This story has three parts, spun together like a rope. There is my story wrapped up in reflections on my teaching in this school. Then there are the stories of young people, teachers, and youth workers. And the story is guided by the literature, my interpretations of other stories from other contexts. This rope is not tightly wound like my mother's knitting. Even rows carefully counted. It is more reflective of the knitting my daughter and I produce as we learn to knit together, sort of messy, lumpy in places and frayed on the ends. I think it's better that way. Stories are meant to emerge not from a set pattern but from the voices of those who are doing the telling. Here then are our voices in a story told by me.

The journey I have taken led me to them. I have often wondered why. I have made many decisions along the way regarding what routes to take and the means in

which to get there. I see overlaps in the stories as I consider difficult youth years, myself in a home that wasn't quite comfortable. I understand why many youth leave, how the cold, lonely streets are a better option. I was never there but I know the emotions. I know the choices that aren't really choices at all. I chose to stay. Many of the youth in this study chose to leave. Their choices were more limited, the option to stay more grim, and the results more desperate. I finished high school, which then gave me more choices, along with my family's social position and financial means to take me further. I chose to continue my education, but what of those who had more difficult choices earlier on complicated by a lack of financial and social means to carry them forward? Choices that weren't really choices now narrow to electives unthinkable for the rest of us. Violence, drugs, prostitution, and homelessness become the options for many.

It was the drama at ICHS that drew me in initially. Their stories spoke to me in a powerful way, a way that couldn't be ignored. I already knew from my Master's work that I wanted my education to intertwine with inner city schooling. Now I knew that ICHS was the school. The youth knew that ICHS was the school for them. It was a school that spoke to them, a school they were a part of. Not only that, it was a school started for them and continually adapted to meet their needs. The images portrayed through those first popular theater presentations that I was privileged to watch wrapped themselves around my thoughts and continued to do so throughout my graduate studies. In some ways I saw myself in them. In other ways I was the oppressor, White, middle class teacher in multiple positions of authority and privilege. But I wanted to understand them. My own subjectivity had been informed by some of the same difficulties leaving me in an

advantaged position where empathy collided with desire to understand and a formal education to act upon it.

What is offered here is a hermeneutical snapshot of a particular time and place. We may wonder why it is important to understand this solitary moment when things are so constantly evolving into new forms. The school of this study changes continually to adapt to the needs of students. Events and situations I write about here and now may well have sorted themselves into something new and different by the time I've completed the writing. Yet the story informs something more enduring. Illuminating a group of disenfranchised urban youth who have traditionally been unnoticed by scholarship brings them into view. It changes the way we, as teachers and researchers, look at them. They are no longer numbers, statistics, or problem kids in the classroom, but real people. They suggest to us that there may be other real people in our classrooms that call for us to see them differently. Additionally this story sheds light on unique school practices that notice young people who have fallen through the cracks of other schools. It highlights practices that demonstrate how a rose can grow through those cracks if attentively and patiently nurtured.

The ways in which I interpret my story as intertwined with the stories told to me and presented to you, comes from an openness to understanding that which is familiar yet at the same time unfamiliar. Experience that plays back upon itself builds historical understanding that is both limiting and enlightening. The concept of disenfranchised youth is familiar to me. I have had particular conceptions of disenfranchised youth that constantly change and evolve over time as my understandings of both them and me, are shaped by time, familiarity, and reflection. As an adolescent growing up in a small town

in Manitoba I remember a boy, about my age, suddenly appearing in town on a warm summer day. He was cute, personable and looking to make new friends. It seemed a bit odd at first that he arrived alone but he quickly pointed out that he was related to a family up the street. They didn't know him but they let him pitch his tent on their front lawn. I guess they thought his story was plausible enough. A few days later, though, it was known he was a runaway from BC who must be apprehended, and returned home.

Thinking back on this experience leads me to awareness that the concept of runaway, reflected through language, illuminates an historical understanding, a visual of something familiar. A runaway is an underage youth who is misbehaving, someone who has done something wrong and needs to be punished. A runaway does not have parents who have made mistakes but rather makes the mistakes themselves. Perhaps just a bit misguided. Currently we have street kids who are quite literally, kids who live on the streets. Now who is to blame? Well, we aren't sure but at least this language opens up possibilities for alternatives other than blaming the victim. It leads to questions such as why would a young person be on the streets and what drove them to that cold, harsh place? But there are other problems with street kids, especially if they have squeegees! They can be annoying, always lurking about looking for trouble. Upon embarking on teaching and research at ICHS I held particular visions of the concept of street kids. They were familiar. Involvement with youth and staff members at ICHS helped to make the familiar, unfamiliar. It highlighted tensions between what I understood to be true and what was now disrupted. It opened up conversations that I would now like to open up to you.

Playful Language

Language shapes interpretation and so I offer a word about the language of this dissertation. It is intended to be playful, not to make light of the content but rather to play with themes, to read them in new and different ways. To develop and present an understanding that is an image of me, the writer. The language of hermeneutical inquiry keeps open the possibility of understanding anew and "its language tends, therefore, to be more 'playful' and seemingly less serious than other forms of inquiry" (Jardine, 1998, p. 43). Play, as a serious activity, is lively. My intent with this writing is to bring the story alive. It is through language that we experience understanding and it is through the language of this dissertation that I have come to understandings of myself through the co-participants in my research. Hermeneutics directs us to enter into multiple conversations at multiple levels. I have entered into dialogue with students and staff members, interacted with literature, and conversed with myself through reflective writing. The complexity of this multivocality is presented through original text of participant voices and literature quotes where possible. My voice is layered with the voices of others in an interpretive turn that represents my understanding and learning, leading ultimately to more questions and conversation. Understanding the universal from this instance is a fluid process, never complete. What is important is the opening up of dialogue, primarily with you, the reader.

I have chosen particular terminology for this document. Paying attention to language means noticing not only how others use it, but an attentiveness to my own language use. Ways of categorizing or labeling young people have already placed them somewhere in this dissertation. I have referred to street kids and runaways and the ways

in which these labels focus our attention in a certain way. I have identified the group of youth in this study as disenfranchised urban youth. I consciously chose this label for lack of a better one! Disenfranchised youth, in this context, are defined as disconnected from families and geographical communities. For them, a sense of community is developed with peers who form a community of common experience. Street involvement comes to bind them together in time and place. My hope is that by presenting these students as individuals through their voices you will come to know them as single entities. Yet labels are necessary in order to talk about these youth as a group. Disenfranchised, currently acceptable terminology in this context is further defined as lacking a voice, although this is not completely accurate as I come to understand that these youth do have a voice. It isn't my voice and it isn't listened to in mainstream institutions but youth do speak. Here is an opportunity to listen to what they have to say.

Research, Ongoing, and Other Forms of Questions

Many parts of this text are engaged through playful questioning. Perhaps there are too many questions in some places but they are intended to capture complexity and suggest possibilities for multiple interpretations. As noted by Jardine (1989), "for interpretation to engage, the text and I must be allowed to 'play'" (p. 44). The questions that emerge from playful engagement with the text guide me forward and are presented as an image of my thinking. The concept of the question is central to a hermeneutical analysis. Recognizing that something is not as we had first thought leads us to question, to an openness to new knowledge. I am positioned within my questioning, as both an insider and an outsider. As a teacher at ICHS I had insider knowledge of the school

philosophy and programming as well as relationships with many of the research participants. Many of the conversations held throughout the formal data stage reflect an openness of relationships built on mutual respect. Potts and Brown (2005) call this epistemic privilege, "the privilege insiders have since they have lived experience of the issue under study" (p. 264). Yet I am also an outsider, a university based researcher conducting formal research. The tensions reflected in this insider/outsider position are engaged throughout this dissertation through a hermeneutical action research process, clarified in the next chapter. I demonstrate an attentiveness to the construction of my own knowledge through reflective conversations with myself as writer.

The question gives a sense of direction, a particular perspective. It breaks open a phenomenon providing an answer that is the question. I think about my 10-year-old daughter. She asks questions, lots of questions. Sometimes the questions drive me crazy. I've asked myself, aren't kids supposed to have stopped asking so many questions by that age? But I realize that the questions shed light on her thinking. They allow me to know more about her. She opens herself up by asking questions. Maybe some kids stop asking when they become aware of that. One day we were driving down 99 Street together and we drove into rain. Sydney said, "Do you think it just started raining or was it already raining and we drove into it?" Hmm, that opened up possibilities for hermeneutical conversation. And it told me something about her. And the rain, that was not as it had earlier appeared to be.

How do we know if we've asked the *right* questions when it comes to research? When the intent is to gain insight then knowing what questions to ask becomes difficult. In this endeavor we are guided by a desire to know. We are trying to reveal something

that can only be exposed by the question. The question is defined by its questionability, its openness. Yet it is also bounded in the posing. My research questions were informed by my teaching and prior understandings of ICHS. They were also informed by a desire to know. To this end I began with an understanding reflected in my original research questions expressive of my purpose to better know ICHS and its participants.

Research questions.

1. What experiences of students at ICHS led them to leave public school? How did the intersecting factors of "race," gender, and class affect the school experiences of these youth? What are the significant differences between the experiences of Aboriginal youth and non-Aboriginal youth within the population of youth who have been placed "at risk"?
2. What led these students to return to school at ICHS?
3. How does the program at ICHS work (theory and practice)? What have been the experiences of students at ICHS?

I designed open-ended interview questions for both students and staff members intended as a starting point for conversation (see Appendix A). Other questions emerged and were pursued in the interview and focus group dialogues. Many more questions come out of the writing and will continue to be pursued into the future.

As I have noted, the questions while open are also bounded in the posing. Notably, I have limited the analysis to the intersections of "race," gender, and class. Certainly there are other important factors to consider. I have often thought about geographical location in the context of study with disenfranchised urban youth. How does

place inform subjectivity in Edmonton's inner city? While most youth seem comfortable in this locale it does shape them in specific ways. For many, there is also an element of multiple spaces. Some have come to Edmonton from Reserve communities or often travel back and forth between these places. Belonging is informed by a variety of factors specific to location. What stories do youth tell themselves about their place in these environments and the larger world around them? How might these stories inform schooling? Beginnings to these conversations were opened up in a couple of interviews and engaged in this dissertation where they relate specifically to schooling. The larger conversation about place more generally defined will have to wait for another study.

Analysis of the research is based on a three month time period during which the formal data collection took place. While the writing of this dissertation is also informed by reflections on my teaching over a broader period of time, both before and after formal data collection, thoughts converge on the aforementioned moment in time. The moment in time begins with my introduction of the project to school staff at a staff meeting in early April of 2004. The final interview signaling the end of data collection took place in late June of 2004. I kept field notes for all of these interviews as well as tape recordings except for one student interview where the student did not consent to the recording. My field notes also include observations made at staff meetings and attendance at a number of the school's sharing circles throughout the period of formal data collection.

I conducted three focus group discussions. The first discussion was with senior staff members, including two teachers and three youth workers. The second focus group involved nine students. I brought pizza and pop to the lunchtime gathering of students, as it was Friday, a day in which school ends at noon and lunch is not provided by the school.

It seems likely that the provision of lunch contributed to attendance at this meeting, however the group participated and contributed thoughtful comments throughout the one and one-quarter hour duration of the focus group discussion. Following up on the focus group conversations, I conducted six individual interviews with students of approximately one-hour duration for each interview. I also had a one on one conversation with one of the youth workers, followed by another interview with the same individual and another youth worker together. A focus group discussion with three new teachers followed up questions that arose in the earlier focus group discussion with senior staff members.

Institutional Context

Like the youth in this study, ICHS also grew out of the cracks. The institutional field of public schooling in Alberta has left little room for disenfranchised urban youth. School policies and practices have historically accommodated those who grow well in concrete boxes, who maybe don't need as much exposure to fresh air and sunshine at school. Students who are fed and nurtured and encouraged to grow at home can continue to do well if deprived of sunshine for a few hours each day. Well, maybe that's a bit harsh. Schools don't mean to deprive budding students of their lifeblood. But I think of my oldest daughter who started school at age four. She was intimidated by the older students in her class, many who had learned from older siblings and knew answers to questions that were posed by their teacher. Her confidence dropped quickly and often throughout her early schooling as she entered competitive reading and math programs. Even losing baby teeth became competitive as each event was recorded on a chart on the

wall. Many times my partner and I struggled to rebuild the confidence at home that was stripped away at school. But what of those others who didn't thrive in public school settings and had no one outside of school to pick up the pieces?

Public schooling in Alberta has changed in recent years, away from a more universal mass education approach, identified by P. Brown (1990) as the first wave in the socio-historical development of schooling in much of the Western world. Mass schooling for the working classes in some ways was more effective for disenfranchised urban youth. The idea of greater school choice, indicative of a move to conform to the wealth and wishes of parents (P. Brown, 1990), is reflective of current provincial initiatives. Given voice through the School Act, it sounds like it should be a good thing. Choice for whom though, and choice about what? Choice for all, but the choices are different depending on financial and social circumstances. Later in this dissertation I consider the neighborhood school many of the youth in this study attended and left prior to high school completion. It is a school with an arts based focus and a strong reputation for quality programming. Many students want to go there. Those with the *most* choice do, along with the neighborhood youth who have little choice. This school serves those who not only have the financial and social means to get there but who have always experienced those elements. Art, drama, or dance lessons starting at a very young age would be appropriate preparation for making the choice to attend this school. Disenfranchised neighborhood youth who attend this school also have choices. They can leave or wait to be pushed out.

The school has choices too. It can choose who to accept and who to reject, in various and subtle ways. Schools can no longer expel students without providing an

alternative. But you're saying wait, alternative programs aren't all dumping grounds and you're right. The Edmonton Public School Board, for example, offers alternative programs to meet religious, cultural, and language needs (Wishart Leard, Taylor & Shultz, 2006). In addition they cater to special interests such as sports and science. They consider age, modes of delivery and gender. And they consider outreach programs for youth "at risk." Consider the choices though, and who is going where. Again, choice is dependent on financial and social means. Programs designed to meet the needs of disenfranchised urban youth often provide an opportunity to pass difficult students along rather than paying careful attention to meeting their needs.

Yet the institutional field has also opened up cracks that allow schools like ICHS to push through and thrive. It isn't easy, the obstacles are many, but a rose can grow from concrete. Within the institutional framework of schooling in Alberta there are publicly funded school systems, comprised of both public and Catholic schools. Provincial legislation also permits both charter and private schools to become accredited and eligible for provincial funding on a per student basis, albeit at a lower level of funding than public schools receive. The school of this study is private, provincially accredited and funded. In order to meet the requirements of a private school in Alberta, the school must offer provincial curricula, students must write provincial examinations in core grade 12 courses to graduate, and they must employ certified teachers. The school also survives by accessing additional funds from outside sources. Twelve years ago staff at ICHS saw a need, expressed by youth who were involved in Inner City Drama. In 1993, some of the youth who were involved in the drama group had come to terms with many of the issues that were blocking their development and had come to see education as an important step

toward changing their lives (Cloutier, 2002). They re-enrolled in public school. It didn't work out for many of the same reasons that had caused them to leave schools earlier. They had changed in some fundamental ways, but the schools had not. The schools were still immovable concrete structures, without cracks.

The youth in Inner City Drama then suggested starting their own school. The seed was planted. ICHS was established as a private school in 1993. By 1995 though, the school was in financial difficulty and faced possible closure. Edmonton Catholic Schools agreed to a partnering that allowed ICHS to keep their doors open with enough room to breathe so that they could continue with flexible programming. In 2004, the arrangements made became untenable and again school staff had to search for possible openings, in the institutional structure that would allow them to continue to grow. Once again ICHS became a private school. The Alberta School Act that gives statutory provisions for private schools requires these schools to be registered with the Minister of Education (Peters, 2000). These schools must operate in accordance with the provincial requirements relating to achievement and achievement testing and agree to regular evaluation and monitoring. However, as a private school ICHS has greater flexibility in areas such as hiring of teachers and scheduling of classes. For example, ICHS personnel can hire teachers who have a desire to work in an alternative setting, with a disenfranchised population rather than having teachers selected for them, as would be the case if they were a part of a public school system.

Education Policy and Disenfranchised Urban Youth

Decisions made by ICHS staff directed at providing schooling for disenfranchised urban youth, circulate within policy aims that have impacts on a number of levels of program. As a private school they are confined by provincial requirements to meet standards of "achievement and achievement testing and agree to regular evaluation and monitoring" (Peters, 2000, p.2). While operating within this framework arguably leads to an ultimate destination offering young people choices for their futures, choices to pursue further studies at the postsecondary level or move into the workforce, it is also limiting in that programming has to move in a defined direction. Informal approaches that are prevalent in the initial literacy program are funneled out as students move into and through higher-level academic courses. Caught up in a need to focus on curriculum and prepare students for provincial exams, teachers have little time for critical discussions that are grounded in the experiences of disenfranchised youth. Students too, are readily focused on curriculum content. Years of schooling have taught them, that is the *real* content. It is what is important, what *regular* schools and *normal* youth are doing.

Yet operating as a private school offers the best option for them at this point in time, an option that does not require students to pay tuition and allows access to both public and private funding sources. Operating with a formal school structure that gives youth chances to succeed academically and in ways that allow them self-sufficiency throughout their lives is also a direction the school has determined to be most effective for disenfranchised students many of whom are Aboriginal. Statistics Canada (2005) reports in "Aboriginal Peoples Living off-Reserve in Western Canada" that while Aboriginal youth continue to struggle to find employment in western Canada, those who have completed some form of postsecondary education (trade school, college, or

university) had employment rates close to the national average of their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Arguments put forth in support of private schooling to meet religious or cultural needs would also support an argument for disenfranchisement as a specialized programming focus. Certainly the "constructs of tolerance, understanding and respect for cultural and religious diversity must be dealt with systematically and seriously in the curriculum in all our schools" (Peters, 2000, p.5) and the same could be said for socioeconomic diversity. When students' needs are not being met, however, within the public school system the best option for these youth at this point in time is to be educated in an alternative, publicly funded private school.

Decisions made by ICHS staff are also made within the residual effects of provincial educational policy. Alberta Learning's "Removing Barriers to High School Completion – Final Report" (2001) is one such document. The barriers report indicates an understanding of the complexity of the struggles carried out by many students who eventually leave the public school system prior to high school completion. The report notes, "the causes of early school leaving are so complex and multi-faceted that a new, more comprehensive and holistic view of early school leaving is needed" (p. i). This underlying premise is indicative of a philosophical approach to public schooling that includes the need to remove barriers for all students and create conditions conducive to high school completion.

Further reading of the document however leads me to question the reasons for the need to improve high school completion rates. Alberta Learning (2001) "is committed to ensuring Albertans have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and to learn

quickly and flexibly throughout their lives" (p. i). Why? Who defines success and the reasons for life long learning? Well, in this case the approach seems to coincide with Alberta Learning's Business Plan that has set targets for improving high school completion rates. So is the primary goal to meet the needs of business or the needs of disenfranchised youth and how do these differ?

The barriers report acknowledges a need to improve high school completion for Aboriginal students, an understanding also apparent in the "First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework" developed by Alberta Learning in consultation with the Native Education Policy Review Advisory Committee consisting of First Nations and Métis authorities, and other key education stakeholders (Alberta Learning, 2002). While this document focuses on the need to reduce barriers to high school completion for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners it also includes the need to foster understanding and respect throughout the educational and wider community. It reflects a commitment to enhance educational opportunities for Aboriginal learners, yet as this dissertation will point out, many youth in inner city Edmonton remain unaffected by these good intentions.

Historical Understandings of Schooling for Youth Living in Difficult Inner Cities

Something came before this time. Youth growing up in violent, difficult homes and neighborhoods weren't always thought of as disenfranchised. In an earlier period, work was more available for those who didn't complete high school and in fact, high school completion was not even sought after by many. In the early 1900s, those without high school diplomas were able to find productive work that paid decent wages and were

able to participate meaningfully in social life (Huston, McLoyd & Coll, 1994; Barr & Parrett, 1995). At that time in Canada, 90% of school-age youth dropped out of school. Unskilled workers were needed to fill many different jobs including those in forestry, agriculture, and manufacturing. By the 1950s the dropout rate had declined to below 50% but with respectable employment still available for those who didn't complete high school. Since that time those opportunities have rapidly disappeared giving way to an international economy and a growing trade deficit that sees many lower income level jobs moving to the global South. Lower level service jobs that moved in to fill the void leave workers unable to live comfortably.

Work, in Aboriginal societies historically, was a collaborative, community affair. Knowledge was passed on orally, through extended families. For example, in the Mi`kmaw tradition kinship relationships were "far more important than the amount of education or the kinds of jobs" people had (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 89). Since that time though the political and economic subjugation of Aboriginal peoples have damaged community networks and subsequent patterns of work. Added to the above noted changes in the global economy reflective of Canada's overall economic structure, many Aboriginal youth have been left with little opportunity for meaningful employment. Aboriginal youth living off Reserve have lower levels of employment compared to their non-Aboriginal peers with a greater proportion of that employment concentrated in service sector industries (Statistics Canada, 2005). In an overall climate of decreased job opportunities and increased poverty rates in Canada, many urban Aboriginal youth currently find poverty, homelessness, racism, and frustration to be daily realities.

The rise in poverty rates in Canada mirrors other industrialized nations in its growth beginning in the 70s and 80s. One in eight school-aged children in Canada lives in a family with very low income, defined as below $20,000 per year (Yalnizyan, 2000; Canadian Council on Social Development, 2001). Between 1993 and 1998 children under age 18 in the poorest families in Canada became poorer while the most affluent became increasingly well off. Entering the 21st century, Edmonton's rise in poverty featured market incomes below 1981 levels in a political climate of cuts to taxation and spending on social programs leaving families more reliant on market forces (Lawrence, 2001). With few good jobs available, there has been an enormous growth in two income and part time employment as many households struggle to make ends meet (Levin, 1995).

These economic and social changes have very real effects on disenfranchised urban youth in Edmonton. Many of the youth in this study left school without completing junior high. Disillusioned with a lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement in school and unable to see a connection between schooling and the menial jobs they are likely to hold, they exercise their voice by walking away. Others have left difficult home environments. Attending school just doesn't happen for those who are wandering the streets. Some enter the cycle of the working poor. Boring, dead end jobs are interspersed with unemployment and struggles to pay the bills. Schooling may look appealing from this vantage point but it is too late to go back. For others, desperation leads to drug dealing or prostitution, another trap that is difficult to get out of. Enter Inner City High School.

Summary

The image of a rose growing through a crack in the concrete casts light on the strands that weave together to form this critical literacy. Light shines through, reflecting both clarity and shadows as it bounces off the surrounding concrete, encouraging growth. I too, grow out of this process, my learning informed by the development of ICHS and the people who inhabit it. Like a vine reaching upward, we grow stronger as our stories intertwine. I have learned about the power of possibilities, of what can be achieved by believing that a nurtured seed can grow even through obstacles. And I have learned that boxes aren't necessarily the best place for plants.

Choice, in relation to the institutional context of schooling is not as it earlier appeared to be. Choice, presented so unobtrusively, is not. We can plant a seed in rich, well-fertilized soil and carefully tend to the flower's long-term growth or we can toss the seed carelessly, allowing the wind to take it where it may. It's a choice. Better choices for some, more limited choices for others. My social position allows me to make better choices for my children. This study allows me to see how those choices affect youth who don't have those options. The language we use in schools also reflects choices. Documents written to address the needs of disenfranchised urban youth present language that both binds and opens up possibilities. So does the language I use in relation to this population. My hope is that through careful attention I have tended toward opening up new imaginings in this dissertation. My understandings of disenfranchised urban youth grow out of historical conditions that shape both me, and them; I hope to find a balance that reflects both.

The chapters in this dissertation build upon the ideas developed in preceding chapters to tell a story of Inner City High School that captures complexity and

uniqueness. Chapter 2: Interpretive Methodological Process, outlines the ways in which theory informs both me, and my research project. Critical theory and critical pedagogy emerge as important influences in the formation of my thoughts. As well, hermeneutics and particularly hermeneutical action research have come to illuminate the interpretive framework. The reconstruction of historical materialism necessitates an active integration of intersections of "race," and gender. Chapter 3: Framing the story, sets up ICHS as a unique educational site worthy of study for what it has to offer to questions of schooling for disenfranchised urban youth. Chapter 4: Comfort that eludes (programs for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth), explores the tensions inherent in discussions with youth regarding their experiences of segregation and experiences of integration. In this chapter I trouble my own understandings of this population of disenfranchised youth. I also explore the idea of comfort in both public and segregated school settings. The type of comfort that emerges involves an acceptance and involvement in critical discussions, rather than comfort as avoidance of difficult places. Chapter 5: Comfort that eludes (subjectivities in schools), sheds light on youth as individuals. We begin to see who they are through processes of marginalization in public schools and the surrounding community. Chapter 6: Tensions of pedagogy, looks at the dissonance between our understandings of youth through a process of objectification in schools and the struggles to decode these same youth through critical practice. Chapter 7: Coming to understand school practices, is an in-depth examination of the practices of ICHS that create the conditions for learning and the critical pedagogy that is lived out in this context. Popular theater and critical literacy play prominently in this process. The final chapter, Conclusions – the story speaks, outlines my discovery and learning throughout the

writing of this dissertation. It ends with the ways in which this story informs broader discussions of the sociology of education and critical pedagogy literature.

Chapter 2: Interpretive Methodological Process (hermeneutical form and critical structure)

> Understood interpretively, [such] incidents can have a generative and re-enlivening effect on the interweaving texts and textures of human life in which we are all embedded. Bringing out these interweavings in their full, ambiguous, multivocal character is the task of interpretation… It is not simply that pedagogy can be one of the themes of interpretive inquiry. Rather, interpretation is pedagogic at its heart (Jardine, 1998, p. 34).

Introduction

My overall aim in this methods section is to develop an understanding (both for myself and the reader) of what an interpretive methodology looks like in the context of my research project in an alternative inner city high school for disenfranchised urban youth. In the previous chapter I reflected on processes of socialization that led me to this study. I also came to this research project as the product of many years of study and reflection on the person I am as a theorized being. Twelve years ago I embarked on an academic journey sparked by an interest in peace education and community practice. This led me to the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Dr. Toh Swee-Hin. It also led me to make connections with the Secondary Education department, and in particular, Dr. Terry Carson. As I began the process of actively reading and reflecting with the intent of writing my dissertation, I realized how significantly these early influences shaped my theoretical and philosophical development as a graduate student. As St. Pierre (2001) notes, what is of interest is "how we come to theory and how we use it to make sense of our lives" (p. 143). As I moved about, was influenced by many others, learned new theories and ideas, I left behind some earlier and, I thought, less relevant ideas only to come back to them recently as I try to put together all the pieces of my research "puzzle."

Emerging Theoretical Perspectives

As part of my Master's degree program I completed course work in critical theory, hermeneutics, action research, indigenous education, international and intercultural education, and poverty studies. Exposure to readings and discussions related to these topics shaped my thinking and led me to consider a PhD program and my current interest and study at ICHS. Some of the professors I had worked with in the Secondary Education department felt I could greatly enhance my understanding of classroom practice and ultimately enrich my PhD program by first engaging in a BEd after degree and gaining some classroom teaching experience. This is advice I decided to follow and would agree with the rationale with the added understanding that I now have an enhanced ability to contribute to the field of education due to this experience. I feel I have a much deeper understanding of the complexities of classroom practice after teaching in the school of my research study. This teaching practice is now firmly entrenched in the interpretive methodology of my case study of ICHS.

Critical theory.

As mentioned earlier, much of the course work, readings, and discussions within my Master's program shaped my early conceptual thinking. I have considered myself a social theorist but with specific understandings of poverty, "race," and gender viewed through a critical theory lens. These "categories" of social identity while holding potential for essentializing groups of people, must be taken seriously, in a non-essentializing way, because they "become real inside institutional life" and are "political ways of organizing the world" (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xviii). Like Weis and Fine, I "seek

to understand how individuals make sense of, resist, embrace, and embody social categories" while at the same time "situate others in relation to themselves" (p. xviii). While this is an ongoing process of questioning about how we conceive of ourselves theoretically, a beginning point is an understanding of the theories that have shaped us. The term critical theory is most closely associated with the Frankfurt school and the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse (Morrow, 1994). For me, critical theory is important as an influence in the development of critical pedagogy, grounded in a combination of "Frankfurt school, Antonio Gramsci, and Paulo Freire" (Lather, 2001, p. 184). The writings of the Frankfurt school theorists are highlighted by disillusionment with the spirit of positivism affecting Western reason. Considered a negative dialectic of enlightenment, these writings included a critique of science and technology as ideology. Educational systems were considered to reinforce class advantage and distort the process of learning in the interests of a form of social control based on bourgeois morality (Morrow, 1995). Certainly we can see how public schooling reinforces class advantage in a contemporary Western context (Apple, 1990; Darder, 1991), but how might this understanding be taken up in an inner city research project? And how has it been incorporated into my thinking? Early work within critical theory that began as a critique of positivism changed under the influence of Habermas. The older Frankfurt school tradition had emphasized a notion of objective reason, an idea Habermas attempted to overcome with his theory of knowledge. Habermas hoped to renegotiate the relationship between critical theory and the empirical social sciences into a contemporary philosophy of science. The social sciences must incorporate both analytic and hermeneutic methodologies and the reconstruction of historical materialism in order to overcome both

logical empiricism and traditional hermeneutics (Habermas, 1979). It is this approach that I take up in my study of ICHS.

An understanding of bourgeois society is central to the anatomy of pre-capitalist societies while an analysis of capitalism itself provides an understanding of social evolution in a Western framework (Habermas, 1979). The concept of social organization can be discerned in capitalist societies because, with the introduction of relations between wage labor and capital, the class structure appeared for the first time in a pure, economic form. Here we began to see a system that functioned to deal specifically with the tasks of material reproduction. A *class* analysis is important in understanding the conditions in which the youth in my study have lived their lives. This form of analysis "provides categories that enable us to understand the social and structural positions of people" (p. 791) and how groups of people who are similarly positioned may have political effects (Scott, 1991). Throughout my graduate studies I have pursued questions of poverty and have noted a decline in interest in social class as a category of analysis in favor of gender and "race," or culture. Recently, however, social class has re-emerged in a form that integrates all three categories. P. Hall (2001) reminds us that "social class is experienced differently" (p. 237) by persons who vary by gender and "race"/ethnicity. The interaction of these three variables needs to be treated as "problematic, contingent, and historically variable" (p. 237). P. Hall goes on to say that arguments about the interrelationship of variables to each other "cannot be settled on theoretical or rhetorical grounds" (p. 238). It must be resolved "through systematic attention to empirical evidence" which, while talked about, "no research seems yet to have appeared examining the interrelationship between *all* three inequality forms" (p. 238). My hope is to contribute to the building of

an empirical base of research that focuses on the intersections of poverty, "race," and gender in the context of disenfranchised urban youth through a lens of my own teaching and social location.

It seems that a class analysis as informed by a critical theory tradition needs to pay particular attention to the problem of essentializing groups of people through fixed identities such as "worker," "peasant," or "woman." The imposition of a categorical subject-status has "masked the operations of difference in the organization of social life" (Scott, 1991, p. 792). Poster (1989) outlines the reconstruction of historical materialism as put forth by Habermas. The legitimacy of the state is in crisis because economic issues have become politicized. Science is integrated into the economy and functions as part of ideology. Habermas outlined the need for a public sphere that would function separate from private interests. In this public space, working class politics must yield to general conditions for free public discussion. However, poststructuralists would point to a concern with the "foundation and limits of theory" and the idea that "truth is not a transcendent unity' (Poster, 1989, p. 15). Fraser (1995) argues for a postmodern conception of the public sphere where a multiplicity of publics counters "systemic social inequalities" (p. 295). For Habermas, theory needs to consider symbolic interaction, or language, and create the conditions for an ideal speech situation. Critical theory must ground reason in a concept of communicative action rather than in a concept of consciousness. Critiques of Habermas suggest that theory cannot be "a solid point of origin" or the "ground of politics" as the results invariably become authoritarian. Rather discourses are a preferred way of getting at *truths* as "forms of power since they shape practices" (p. 16). As Scott (1991) argues, Habermas's ideas reveal something different

when we try to "understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed" (p. 792).

Moving from theory of the "big picture" into the practice of schools, how do we begin to consider the relationship between the whole and the parts? A crisis in education emerges due to the inequality of educational access and the fact that educational expansion gave rise to tension between expectations and outcomes as outlined by Morrow & Torres (1995). This notion defined by P. Brown (1990) as parentocracy, and particularly the idea of school choice have shaped my thinking about ICHS and its students. Expectations and outcomes differ across the socioeconomic spectrum. As Bernstein (2004) clarifies, "the explicit commitment to greater choice by parents and pupils is not a celebration of a participatory democracy but a thin cover for the old stratification of schools and curricula" (p. 213). Additionally, the colonial approach to Aboriginal education and specifically residential schools left a legacy for disenfranchised Aboriginal inner city youth who find greater limits to educational access and long range opportunities. Other forms of structural violence have affected youth in this study in terms of their expectations of schooling. This dissertation explores the experiences and expectations these students have for educational attainment, and their beliefs about equitable outcomes of schooling.

Critical theory tells us that the expansion of the educational system is increasingly independent of changes in the occupational structure. Do urban youth see education as relevant to their futures? What occupations, if any, do they see as possible outcomes for them? Bourdieu (1977) tells us elements of professional roles that are outside of actual job functions are important for conferring occupational status. Manners, grooming,

familiarity with high culture, and social connections all ensure the middle and upper classes confer their social status on their children. While this notion may have real effects, what does it mean for the day-to-day lives of inner city youth? Bourdieu believes knowledge of the dominant system and access to resources can ensure the middle and upper classes economic success by providing their children with the skills to do well in schools and the extra curricular skills needed to establish a place in dominant society. What about the values and skills held by poor, disenfranchised urban youth? How can we begin to value what they have to offer and incorporate their experiences into schooling? How can we begin to see *value* differently? Morrow and Torres (1995) tell us that the suppression of potential resistance can be traced to the processes of colonization of the life-world by bureaucratic powers and the commodification related to ideology formation. ICHS, the focus of this study, highlights resistance through valuing the knowledge of youth who occupy lower socioeconomic positions. Yet the processes of colonization and commodification have affected the young people in this study in particular ways, explored later in this dissertation.

The Frankfurt tradition offered a way to critique domination while still preserving a place for rational authority as outlined by Agger (1991). Individual self-realization and rational autonomy are necessary and find their place through rational authority. Education, in a capitalist society, has a reproductive and political function as part of a state-organized process of bureaucratization that attempts to deal with crisis tendencies reflected in the economic sphere. This theory recognizes the "maldistribution of power and resources underlying our society" (Lather, 1986, p. 258) but leads to questions of the "nondialectical use of theory" (p. 261). How do we *ground* theory so that it evolves out

of the experiences of people in their daily lives? Critical theorists hope to develop a mode of consciousness and cognition that breaks the "uncritical identification of reality and rationality" and instead "view(s) social facts as pieces of history that can be changed" (p. 109). A dialectical approach views the world in terms of its potential for change in the future and assumes educators can empower those who are disenfranchised. If so, how do we ensure through emancipatory research and teaching that change reflects the voices of those we propose to empower? In the case of my research project how do I negotiate and co-create meaning with research participants to ensure an emancipatory praxis? How do I listen to really *hear*? How do I minimize my voice as author over other voices?

Gramsci, like the Frankfurt critical theorists, chose to reinterpret Marx's concepts in relation to twentieth century developments, particularly cultural institutions and revolutionary mobilization. Gramsci highlighted the subject-object dialectic of Marx's work in his theory of praxis and the subjective dimension of social action (Morrow & Torres, 1995). In keeping with Gramscian ideas, what does it mean for me as a teacher and researcher to be conscious of my own actions and situations in the world? Gramsci considered the nature of social order to be cultural hegemony, a system of power based not only on coercion but also on the voluntary consent of dominated classes. The notion of hegemony provides a useful starting point for analysis but has potential to be essentializing without a corresponding theory of power and resistance. Considering a micro focus on Edmonton's inner city, in what ways do *these* youth voluntarily consent to the power of dominant classes and in what ways would they resist these notions? When individuals hold beliefs that reinforce the existing social order that oppresses them, then these beliefs will not automatically disappear when the objective conditions for

change occur. Economic crisis is not sufficient to expose the societal relations that created the crisis. How do youth through their actions reinforce these systems of domination? Their desires for material goods "feed" the structures that created domination, giving way to the struggles of ICHS teachers to unveil the relations of the existing social order. Youth seem merely to want to get good jobs and buy things. Do these youth hold beliefs and desires that reinforce the existing social order and why? These are questions for critical discussion in this inner city context.

Gramsci believed it was crucial to understand the relationship amongst state, civil society, and hegemony in order to understand the process of exploitation and domination in society (Morrow & Torres, 1995). The historical dimension is created by the combination of dominant worldviews that construct commonsense and the basic premises underlying the material bases of a given society. How do dominant worldviews shape our values and understandings of the lives of urban youth? According to Gramsci, the media, schools, family, and church all contribute to this process. Within the context of my study, what are the specific factors to be considered? That is, how do we integrate the macro with the micro-analyses within this study? Hegemony is structured by limited exposure to competing definitions of the sociopolitical world and is continually contested by different groups (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). While hegemonic consent is never complete, social relations are legitimated as natural within this context. An understanding of how hegemony has been constructed, historically, needs to be incorporated into a socialist pedagogy for schools. It seems to me this needs to be done through the raising of questions. These understandings need to be negotiated through dialogue if we are to avoid replacing one *truth* with another. Schools are an important instrument for

knowledge distribution and cultural transmission and as such need to be the venue for access to dominant forms of knowledge by the dominated classes (Morrow & Torres, 1995). This is a necessary precondition for a socialist pedagogy but is not sufficient to bring about change. Schooling needs to construct a new historical bloc and work toward the provision of power to the lower classes and the encouragement of popular movements. Additionally, we need to construct new understandings of what constitutes *knowledge* and alternative ways of looking at power.

Public schooling as a process by which the masses come to conform has a somewhat differing effect on those who are disenfranchised, including the youth who are the focus of this study of ICHS. Many come to believe that schooling can only offer them a place in the margins of society and rebel against what little they feel they can gain from formal education (Dei, 1996). Others are prevented from achieving as they lack the financial resources and awareness of the system needed to compete with the middle and upper classes. Shor (1987) points out that we need to situate formal learning within students' cultures. Formal learning includes the literacy levels, aspirations, themes, and daily lives of students. In order to do this we need to understand our students' cultures through conscious study and discussion. A study of ICHS necessitates an understanding of youth street culture as well. What are the specific cultural practices that come into play in their lives? How do youth conceptualize the idea of culture? How does the idea of place, and Edmonton's inner city, affect self-identity? How do drugs and alcohol impact on sense of belonging? While I have earlier noted the boundaries of this study as confined to schooling, broader sociological understandings shape my interpretations of the schooling experiences of disenfranchised urban youth. A critical theory can also

inform our understandings of the inequalities of "race", gender, and class and how these factors affect disenfranchised youth in schools.

Critical pedagogies.

This reflection on society is joined with self-reflection in a critical analysis (Apple, 1990). As we learn about students' lives we also learn about ourselves, revealing the ways in which we might engage in transforming students' realities. How do we come to know ourselves in order to *know* others? How is it that we are transformed through theory and reflective practice? And, how do we become open to transformation and to *knowing* others? In the words of St. Pierre (2001), how do I "attempt to historicize how I came to this place and then to consider its promises and limits" (p. 142)? The critical pedagogy as practiced at ICHS, by myself and other teachers, needs to be evaluated in relation to critical pedagogy as outlined in the literature. Gore (1993) points out that "critical pedagogy" like "feminist pedagogy" and other sociopolitical approaches have "roots in particular political and theoretical movements" and "focus on pedagogy as constitutive of power relations" (p. 3). Critical pedagogy provides a way of seeing an unjust social order and revealing the ways in which social problems are enacted in the lives of young people who live in impoverished conditions. Like other sociopolitical approaches, critical and feminist pedagogies try to integrate a particular social vision into an analysis of macro issues such as "the institutions and ideologies within which pedagogy is situated" (Gore, 1993, p. 4) with micro concerns of empirical practice. In this way, pedagogy is understood as the "process of knowledge production" (p. 5).

An introduction to the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire was, and continues to be, immensely important in framing my thinking of educational theory and practice. Like hooks (1994) Freire offered me "new ways of thinking about social reality that were liberatory" (p. 45). Many others who have taken up this work have also shaped these understandings (Graveline 1998; Giroux 2001). The critical practices of ICHS programming are, in part, what sparked my interest in teaching and studying at this school. As these practices are integral to school operations they must also be central to my study. The program at ICHS initially grew out of the belief that drama was a powerful tool for addressing social issues. Popular theater strives for social change by involving individuals as groups or members of communities in identifying issues of concern, points of change, and analyzing how change could happen (Prentki & Selman, 2000). Through this medium, youth at ICHS are able to explore their own social reality, draw their own conclusions and work toward appropriate responses. It was through this critical approach that youth identified a need for schooling, recognized that public schooling was not a viable option for them, and suggested the development of a school to meet their needs.

ICHS also takes up critical approaches through popular media and literacy initiatives. How do teachers (including me) co-construct educational opportunities with students to allow experience to inform critical discussions and understandings of the daily lives of youth? In what ways do youth participate in developing understandings of what is *unjust*? Are their thoughts and experiences reflected in these understandings or do the beliefs of teachers dominate discussions? Critical pedagogy offers an approach to education, through dialogue and reflection, whereby the effects of power can be interrogated and the needs of students met (Apple, 1990). Through the process of

"unveiling… reality and thereby coming to know it critically" (Freire, 1996, p. 51) youth at ICHS explore their own social and cultural realities, draw their own conclusions and work toward appropriate responses. Popular theater adopted at ICHS seems particularly conducive to this process while some literacy approaches as well lend themselves to critiques of domination. Youth who have been marginalized and silenced in prior schooling and social locations express their own diverse consciousness and share their understandings with others in the classroom (Wishart Leard & Lashua, 2006).

Dialogue, and its constitutive elements of reflection and action (Freire, 1996), can be seen in introductory courses such as literacy, whereby drama, reading, writing, and media are all used as methods to generate awareness leading to the development of improved reading, writing, and analytical skills. In my own teaching practice, I wonder how effectively I incorporated dialogue into these courses. Higher-level courses, that focus more on curricular content, consider how dialogue can be developed through critical literacy approaches within these frameworks. Again, while the potential is there, consideration needs to be given to the ways teachers are actually incorporating critical approaches into their classrooms. How might students lived experiences be more effectively integrated into curricular content?

The circle is an activity that brings the entire school community together, in the gym, before morning and afternoon classes and at the end of the day and also provides ongoing opportunity for dialogue. The concept of the circle is similar to that outlined by Young (2006) who says,

> The circle structure is made up of universal values that are agreed upon by the participants. These values may include respect, honesty, trust, humility, sharing, inclusiveness, empathy, courage and forgiveness (p. F9).

In creating the conditions for dialogue we, as teachers and researchers not only develop opportunities for students but also learn about ourselves. Engagement in a critical process with youth helps us to understand our own positions within these contexts. How do I position myself within the circle, as a teacher, as a member of "dominant" society? It seems to me that the circle provides an opportunity to encourage dialogue but from within our positions as members of the school community. That is, while circles are intended to break down barriers, we still enter them as particular individuals with particular roles within the school. How does *power* affect discussions in the circle? How successful is this practice at reversing the negative understandings many of these youth have in terms of prior relations with teachers and other authority figures?

Through dialogue both students and teachers develop an awareness of their objective situations and the world in which they both live. In order to achieve positive results from an educational program, we must "respect the particular view of the world held by the people" (Freire, 1996, p. 76). Given the diversity of student and teacher backgrounds within the population at ICHS, dialogue is essential in the mutual discovery of these views of the world. Freire stated that a program that fails to recognize world-views through dialogue constitutes cultural invasion. Given this understanding, we need to incorporate notions of culture as shaped by many different life experiences. For example the world-views of Aboriginal students who are disenfranchised may be affected by ongoing involvement with Reserve communities as well as the street culture in which they have lived much of their lives. Freire (1996) tells us this process of discovery is the starting point of the search to know more. Through a discussion of culture, themes emerge leading into additional focus for educational programming.

From a reflexive perspective a discussion of culture also focuses on the power relations in schools that result in the cultural practices and policies of dominant groups that are affirmed through formal education. What is included and excluded in the curriculum are political choices leading to unequal outcomes for students (Shor, 1992). Teachers make choices regarding ways to change and implement the curriculum. They also mediate the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge, and individual students. As a teacher, what choices do I make in relation to curriculum and pedagogy? How do my notions of what is *right* play into my teaching practice? Gore (1993) influenced by Foucault, asserts that too fixed an understanding of what is right leads to a practice whereby what was once critical becomes a kind of regime of *truth*. Like Gore, I too have "wanted to believe that what I am doing is right" as it is "more difficult to live with uncertainty" (p. 11). As a teacher and a researcher I need to constantly question my *truth* about myself, my practices in schools, and the way I write about the experiences of others within this school. These are questions that will be explored in this dissertation.

Disenfranchised urban youth often receive messages, through formal education, that their knowledge is not valued and authorities are not going to protect or help them in any way. Most students who enroll at ICHS initially resist the attempts made by teachers who wish to break down the barriers that have been built up through past educational experiences and difficult life circumstances. Given the long-term nature of building relationships and creating conditions for pedagogy, many students do not stay at ICHS long enough for more formal teaching to effectively occur. These early contacts with youth, therefore, focus on relationship building through acceptance. The philosophy at

ICHS is that establishing respectful relationships with students is an essential precondition for learning. However, building a relationship of mutual trust and understanding is a long-term process. Keeping students there long enough for this process to occur is an ongoing struggle.

Shor (1992) refers to a "critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change" (p. 15) as being a program for multicultural democracy. The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life through the development of skills, knowledge, and students' high expectations of themselves. Where though, is the teacher's "personal growth" in this approach? Giroux (1988) reminds us "teacher education programs often lose sight of the need to educate students to examine the underlying nature of school problems" (p. 123). To address this critique in my own work I consider how I have changed through teaching and research at ICHS. What have these urban youth taught me about myself? How has my teaching practice been shaped in this environment? How have other teachers and youth workers influenced my understandings? Shor (1992) believes this pedagogy needs to begin with student involvement. Participation is low in traditional classrooms and needs to be increased because "action is essential to gain knowledge and develop intelligence" (p. 17). Lather (2001) however, points out that critical pedagogy needs to operate from between the space of any knowing with a goal of situating "the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias" (p. 189). The task is to learn from "stuck places" or "blunders" (Thelin & Tassoni, 2000) in recognition of the day-to-day messiness of critical practice. This *messiness* certainly fits with my experiences of critical practice in an urban alternative school.

Methodological Process

I embarked on my research project with a firm understanding of critical practices in schools and an underlying critical theory perspective. I began with a case study approach, as outlined by Stake (1995), Merriam (1988), and Yin (1994). I understood the need for an interpretive framework for data analysis, but hadn't thought through how an interpretive approach would shape my study. As I began writing, I became much more fully aware of how important interpretation is as a methodological process. I returned to the hermeneutical philosophy of my earlier Master's program and reconnected with ideas that helped me make sense of my research process and provided a more meaningful way to understand the data. I retain the case study approach as a way to bound my study and keep me from exploring the myriad interesting directions this work could take me. Those will have to wait for other studies.

Case study.

A case study is intended to capture the complexity and uniqueness of a particular case (Stake, 1995) and is therefore appropriate for understanding the alternative program at ICHS, a program rooted in critical pedagogy and catering to a population of disenfranchised urban youth (Cloutier, 1997). A case study can be considered to be both a process and an end product (Merriam, 1988). As a process, a case study looks at a contemporary phenomenon within a particular context. In this case, it is the study of youth who are considered to be disenfranchised, have left school prior to high school completion, and who are attending a unique alternative program. As an end product the study provides an intensive description of the phenomenon. Merriam (1988) adds to this

definition the idea of delimiting the case. The case has to be a unit around which there are boundaries, such as a single school. ICHS was chosen as a site for study because it provides a program that evolved out of a successful inner city drama group, was formed at the request of the youth involved, and was designed to meet their specific needs. A study of this program can highlight the ways this particular group of teachers and students have confronted the problems faced by disenfranchised urban youth.

Qualitative case studies can also be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1988). Case studies focus on a particular situation or program, taking a holistic view of something specific. An approach such as this is fitting for a study of ICHS, as it is a specific case of an alternative program for inner city youth that can shed light on ways of addressing the needs of this population. By looking at the total program, including its participants and the ways in which they approach challenges, insight into the phenomenon of urban youth can be gained. Through the interplay of "multiple conversations", multiple realities are revealed (Steier, 1991, p. 6). Case studies are also descriptive in that the end product provides a thick description of the outcomes of the study (Merriam, 1988). Adding my own story can further enhance the analysis by adding another dimension to the case being investigated. Irigaray, discussed by Weiler (2001) "envisions her writing as conversation – between herself as author and the reader, but also between herself as critic and those she is critiquing" (p. 2). The heuristic character of case studies refers to the fact that these types of reports illuminate the reader's understanding (Merriam, 1988). Relationships and variables that are new and different can be expected to emerge from looking at a particular phenomenon in a different way. Looking at an alternative program for inner city youth from the perspective

of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth learning together can shed light on new ways to increase the academic achievement of these groups.

Case study research can be illuminating within this context because it allows for asking questions that have a unique relationship to the final product, a holistic description of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1988). Through reflective practice we recognize the need to "allow ourselves to hear what our subjects are telling us" (Steier 1991). Through reflective teaching and research I have come to appreciate the importance of asking questions of youth and ICHS staff who have insight into the workings of school programs and their own lives as integral to understandings of the practices embedded in those programs. I have also learned to ask questions of myself, and how I come to develop certain perceptions in my research. It is important to design research questions that will direct observation and reflection in subtle ways that will enhance understanding (Stake, 1995). Ideas need to provide conceptual bridges from what is already known to guide data collection and interpretation. Coming to awareness of my own theoretical framework is a necessary precondition for building those bridges. A focus on issues draws attention to the complexity and context of problems and concerns leading to greater understanding. The study of ICHS is an intrinsic case study because it was chosen as a research site for its unique qualities. The issues related to the school and its students are rooted in political, social, historical, and personal contexts. These issues include poverty, culture, gender, schooling, and justice system involvement. Knowledge of these issues guides us in our observations and helps us recognize and understand the complexity of our research problems. As the research progresses, issues evolve and emic issues emerge (Stake, 1995). These are the issues that come from the people involved in the study. Issues begin

to be restated based on understandings that emerge from interactions involving researcher and the research participants. This process must be engaged in with the understanding that the research can go in unexpected directions. For example, focus group discussions with experienced staff members led to follow up conversations with new teachers regarding teacher preparation and adaptations to teaching in an urban, alternative context. As qualitative researchers we must interrogate our biases and seek to learn others' stories in order to accurately represent the multiple realities of the case (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995).

Qualitative research seeks to understand the human condition through personal involvement of the researcher and by constructing knowledge of what is being studied (Stake, 1995). As a graduate student I have been immersed in issues related to the school, through reading, writing, and reflecting. As well, my teaching practice situated me within school practices and provided an opportunity to develop relationships with students and staff, many of whom became research participants. The type of knowledge that qualitative researchers hope to gain is insight into the complex interrelationships among all the variables being studied. Stake (1995) goes on to explain this as a search for understanding rather than a search for causes. Understanding human experience involves perception of the aims and purposes behind the actions of individual players in the study. For Gadamer (1989) "the question is the path to knowledge" (p. 363). The questions that I ask myself, and others, began with my initial involvement in the school and continue daily as I write my dissertation. Research questions look for expected as well as unexpected relationships between variables. Ongoing interpretation is required to redirect questions toward emerging issues and relationships.

Hermeneutics as method – the hermeneutic tradition.

As I came to understand hermeneutics as a qualitative method, I realized this philosophical approach needed to become a way of thinking about my research rather than just a chapter on analysis at the end of my dissertation. As previously noted, my own theoretical understandings brought to the study shape not only understandings of the intentions and motivations of the expressions of others, "but also one's understanding of the intentions and motivations that stand behind one's own expressions" (J.K. Smith, 1993, p. 183). Understanding myself, and my research participants, requires me to interpret our conversations "in light of an already existing web of background meanings or theories" (p.183). Hermeneutics provides a way to understand who I am and the ways in which I approach an interpretive inquiry. As a theory of understanding, it is also a theory of self-understanding.

J.K. Smith (1993) points out though, that as a theory of understanding, hermeneutics is far from univocal with at least three different versions of hermeneutics relevant to qualitative inquiry. Validation, critical, and philosophical hermeneutics are all approaches taken up by contemporary thinkers. Philosophical hermeneutics represents the form of inquiry that has captured my attention and leads me to my research method of inquiry. Here, Gadamer (1975) leads the discussion through his analysis of our relationship to works of art. The meaning of a work of art can be understood only if "there is an interactive relationship between the work and the interpreter in the sense that just as the interpreter asks questions of the work of art, the work of art asks questions of the interpreter" (J.K. Smith, 1993). This *process* of "the coming into being of meaning"

(p. 195) leads to understanding in which the significance of statements is formed and made complete. How does the research ask questions of me? Who am I in the research and how do I "pay attention to my lived experiences" (St.Pierre, 2001) and the ways in which I choose to explain them? How am I able to transform myself in this research environment? How do my research participants understand me and how do their interpretations affect their engagements with me? These questions guide my inquiry.

The *act* of understanding for Gadamer (1975) relates to the concepts of prejudice and effective historical consciousness. Gadamer rejects the Enlightenment philosophers' claims that knowledge can only be based on the authority of scientific reason. Rather, Gadamer says, "the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience" (p. 9). Understanding our prejudices allows us to be open to our own experiences and allowing these experiences to make a claim on us (J.K. Smith, 1993). The source of prejudice is the past, or our traditions, leading to the related concept of effective historical consciousness. In the words of St. Pierre (2001) "clearly I am somewhere" and need to "attempt to historicize how I came to this place and then to consider its promises and limits" (p. 142). The task for inquiry is to bring historical consciousness to the level of explicit realization. A hermeneutical inquiry means being open to "risking and testing our prejudices in our dialogical encounters with others" (J.K. Smith, 1993, p. 196). And, through consciousness, developing a confidence that enables further dialogue. Traditions are always in the process of being reshaped and reinterpreted. We come to understand through an open encounter that views the past through a lens of prejudice. These prejudices are shaped and reshaped through dialogue with others. Through philosophical

hermeneutics, research "is not about a method for objectively valid understanding, but is rather about understanding *itself*. The researchers' own horizon is broadened within the dialectic of question and answer. It seems to me that this process of understanding has its roots in my Masters degree program. Ideas I was introduced to, reflected upon, and wrote about began a process that continued throughout my PhD program and into my current writing.

Gadamer (1989) outlines Schleiermacher's concept of individuality of understanding "hermeneutics is an *art* and not a mechanical process" (p. 191). It brings the work of understanding "to completion like a work of art." However, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory was limited in that it was designed to interpret a particular (biblical) text that could not be universalized for the human sciences. Dilthey, following the work of Ranke and Droysen, expands romantic hermeneutics into an historical method. D.G. Smith (1991) outlines Dilthey's contribution. Influenced by Droysen, who distinguished between *understanding* as the method appropriate to historical sciences and *explanation* as the methodological foundation of the natural sciences, Dilthey went on to define the human sciences as their own specialty. Additionally influenced by the work of Husserl, Dilthey began to explore *understanding* as a "methodological concept which has its origin in the process of human life itself" (p. 191). Good interpretation comes with the degree to which we can connect experience with expression found in various texts including voices and gestures.

Husserl opened up interpretive work to the idea of research as a *dialogue* between subjects, an approach most relevant to my research project. Husserl's most important contribution was in "overturning the Enlightenment ideal of objective reason" (D.G.

Smith, 1991, p. 191). Objectivity is impossible because there is always an *I* that perceives the world being examined. My subjectivity as a researcher "gets its bearings from the very world that I take as my object" (p. 192). Through dialogue, I become a different person as evidenced in the conversational nature of human experience. Husserl was the founder of modern phenomenological research in the idea that genuine openness to the subject requires that I let the world show itself to me as it is in its essence. Taking a closer look at the concept of *experience* Gadamer (1989) points out the obscurity of the concept. An orientation towards science has meant that experience takes no account of inner historicity. The aim of science is to objectify experience guaranteeing the experience is repeatable. Husserl directed his attention to the problem of the scientific idealization of experience by making *perception* the basis of experience. Perception attracts our affective interest presenting an experience to us as attractive, useful, or repulsive. The senses can then lead to a path of possible explanation. Gadamer sees this focus as problematic in that it continues the tradition of making scientific idealization of experience, in this case perception, the sole focus of understanding disregarding that "language is already present in any acquisition of experience" (p. 348) and needs to be accounted for through interpretation.

Heidegger radically altered hermeneutics by incorporating the question of *Being* into philosophical interpretation. In this tradition, hermeneutics becomes "the foundational practice of Being itself" (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 192). Heidegger's focus on how we are constructed by experience focuses our attention on language, how it is used, and how we are constructed by it. Following Heidegger's casting of interpretation as the primordial mode of human existence, "method could never attain a status independent of

the project of thinking itself" (p. 192). This idea was taken up by Gadamer who emphasized that "appropriate method for interpreting any phenomena could only be disclosed by the phenomena itself through a kind of Socratic dialogical engagement between question and phenomenon" (p. 192). Harrington (2001) argues that Gadamer's thesis of dialogue does not effectively intertwine the ethical and epistemological dimensions of interpretation and in fact the concept of dialogue should describe "certain wider moral and political responsibilities of researchers in civil society" (p. 128). In light of this understanding, my immersion in the research environment becomes essential for interpretation. Identifying relevant questions can only come about through a process of engagement with the school. By recognizing the limitations inherent in the objectifying nature of relationships of researchers to their subjects, understanding the communicative origins of knowledge may preclude the need to exclude preconceptions and normative value judgments (Harrington, 2001). Graduate studies involvement in issues related to ICHS while simultaneously teaching at the school created conditions for openness to what the questions revealed and were continuously explored through research and practice.

Gadamer (1989) also engages with the idea of movement between whole and part, known as the circle of understanding. The whole, or unity, is interpreted differently throughout the hermeneutical tradition. It can be found in Droyson's concept of life-history, Dilthey's life-experience, and what Hegel described as world spirit. Unity comes about through an act of interpretation of the whole, or text, with the individuality of the parts. The subject matter of interpretation is what is between the I and the Thou, or what is felt, as words become images. Experience, then, is important for the *wisdom* that comes

out of it versus the experience of what happens to you. How do we pay *attention* to the wisdom in experience given there is no permanence to the notion of experience? There is always movement in that something came before the theory being espoused. Experience is a process. *Truth* is conceived of in terms of impermanence therefore insights into ICHS can only be written about through an awareness of time and place.

This focus on Being in experience represents a shift away from epistemology toward ethics and relations with others. Experience is present only in the individual observation, not in a previous universality (Gadamer, 1989). In this notion "lies the fundamental openness of experience to new experience" (p. 351). It is the journey that is important, not absolute knowledge of the world but rather the interpretation of experience. Making sense of the world is to shape it and give direction. Understanding becomes a questioning, a way of shedding light, or revealing the world to us. Gadamer (1989) would say that this revealing is essentially a negative process. While Hegel has conceived of experience as having "the structure of a reversal of consciousness and hence it is dialectical," Gadamer points out that "experience is initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be" (p. 354). The negativity of experience has a productive meaning. Initially the self thinks itself different and separate from what it belongs to (man is different from nature). The self, in a spiritual form of consciousness, works through history to self-consciousness. Hegel describes this as "the experience that consciousness has of itself" (p. 355). Unity with oneself is first established in "the reversal that consciousness undergoes when it recognizes itself in what is alien and different" (p. 355).

How do I understand myself as a White, middle class, woman, teacher, PhD student in *relation* to urban youth, living in poverty, many of who are Aboriginal? What have I learned about myself through dialogue with ICHS students and staff? What prejudices have been revealed? Teaching at ICHS led me to many understandings of how my values as a middle class teacher came into my teaching and were often inappropriate responses to the needs of my students. Reflecting on how I came to these understandings helped me in my relationships with youth. In this dissertation I reflect on how my *difference* lead me to openness to others' difference and how I know others by knowing myself.

Hermeneutic inquiry.

So how can the hermeneutic tradition inform my study of ICHS? As I revisit and work through readings on hermeneutics and inquiry I can see how hermeneutics as an interpretive approach can help me to understand how, through teaching practice and interview conversations, meaning is co-created. For example, as a White, middle class teacher and researcher, I wondered how should I go about representing the voices of urban youth, many of whom are Aboriginal students. After much reading of Indigenous education epistemologies and practices I continued to be confused about best practices for schools and my role in interpreting their voices through research. Should I *be* engaged in teaching and research in this context given that my social class and cultural background seemed so different from my research participants? How could we come to understand each other through conversation? Some literature advocates segregated schools with immersion in traditional cultural practices operated by and for Aboriginal

students (Buckley, 1992). Other literature focuses on the ways we need to begin to work and learn together in public school contexts that cross cultural boundaries (Sarris, 1993; Graveline, 1998; Makokis, 2000). I came to accept a position supporting the appropriateness of my involvement in this school (and the involvement of many of the school's staff members who are also White and middle class). I believe that sincere engagement with others is central to good teaching and research. Beyond an appropriate beginning orientation though, *how* do we engage with each other to co-create meaning?

Critiques of past theories and methods of research have pointed to ideas and processes originating in Western thought as inappropriate for studies involving non-western groups or individuals. I have understood and appreciated this concern for quite some time but have been unclear as to how to tie together the diverse elements of my study into something coherent. While Indigenous education literature offers some ways to approach an interpretation of Aboriginal students, what about the non-Aboriginal students? And what about the vast diversity within each of these sub-populations within the school? How do I come to understand the teachers and youth workers? While hermeneutics is certainly Eurocentric in origin it has "the capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries to enable dialogue between people and traditions" (D.G. Smith, 1991). It seems to me to offer an approach that allows the divergent pieces to come together in ways that "show how all traditions open up onto a broader world which can be engaged from within the language of one's own space" (p. 195). All interpretation takes place from historically situated perspectives and we cannot know our preconceptions solely by self-reflection. We can only know our own cultural

particularities through "a dialogical encounter with otherness that propels us into self-awareness" (Harrington, 2001, p. 30).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I came to this study having been shaped by the ideas of critical theory and critical pedagogy. Over time I was exposed to continuing critiques of this tradition and wondered how to modify my beliefs and understandings to answer the apparent shortcomings of the theory. Clearly, in a study such as mine, poverty is a major consideration and one that has as a component of its interpretive frame, a societal structure. However, when categories such as class "are taken as ultimately fixable determinants of social reality, instead of being simply interpretive frameworks which themselves can be interpreted" there is a danger of using critical pedagogy to create a new regime of truth through a "predetermination to shape the social order in fixed directions" (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 196). Speaking *with* and listening to others requires "a genuine meeting of the different horizons of understanding" (p. 197). This is certainly not in contrast with Paulo Freire's original conceptions of critical pedagogy when he states:

> The dialogical theory of action does not involve a Subject, who dominates by virtue of conquest, and a dominated object. Instead, there are Subjects who meet to *name* the world in order to transform it... Cooperation, as a characteristic of dialogical action – which occurs only among Subjects (who may, however, have diverse levels of functions and thus of responsibility) – can only be achieved through communication (Freire, 1996, p. 148).

So, we need to arrive at understandings through relationships. This seems reasonable in my experience at ICHS. Dialogue with students and staff has been open and ongoing, in classrooms, in circle, in staff meetings, and in interview discussions. D.G. Smith (1991) reminds us that a researcher needs to "be prepared to deepen her or his own self-understanding in the course of the research" (p. 198). Gadamer compares this process to

Plato's Socratic dialogues where by asking questions, the participants in dialogue end up questioning themselves (Harrington, 2001, p. 32). Classroom pedagogy as well as interview practice "requires a giving of oneself over to conversation" and "a forgetfulness which is also a form of finding oneself in relation to others" (p. 198). Through teaching and learning at ICHS I have had many opportunities to deepen my understandings of urban young people and their educators. Deepening understandings through a persistent search for questions is the task of hermeneutics. The quest is for genuine questions but never ones for which there are final answers. Hermeneutics remains "resolutely open ended" (Smits, 1997, p. 281). Educational action research is also concerned with genuine questions, but questions that "carry a more immediate normative and practical import for action" (p. 281). Questions are how I demonstrate my attention to a reflexivity leading to creation of meaning within my teaching and research in this context. I will share some of these understandings in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

For me, the ideas of Paulo Freire have been instrumental in shaping my thinking about teaching and schools. I was introduced to "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" early in my Master's program at a time when my idealism and enthusiasm for global issues and their manifestation locally were paramount in my mind. Being immersed in global issues through readings and class discussions seemed to offer only depressing thoughts about the abysmal state of much of the planet. I wondered how we could possibly make the world a better place when the problems were so immense. Then entered Freire with, not only ideas, but also a blueprint for how they can and do work in practice – he offered a *praxis*, a model to live and work by.

While recognizing the revolutionary and ground breaking work of Freire who "has been an inspiration to progressive educators seeking ways to use education to build more just societies in settings throughout the world" (p. 74), Weiler (2001) points to his failure to recognize his "conceptualization of liberation and oppression as imagined in terms of male experience" (p. 81). Even in response to criticisms, Freire failed to recognize these critiques as anything more than a use of sexist language. Lather (2001) notes that critiques of critical pedagogy focus on the "masculinist voice of abstraction, universalization, and the rhetorical position of the one who knows" (p. 184). Macedo (2004), responding to this criticism of Freire's work, points out that these interpretations of critical pedagogy often highlight a contradiction. Many White feminists have shielded themselves from the realities that created oppressive conditions and from which they themselves benefit. What Freire in fact argued for was an authentic pedagogy that denounces the paternalistic attitudes that result in pseudocritical educators. He believed an authentic pedagogy struggles toward narrowing the gap between our words and our actions. Freire spoke of envisioning a "transformation that implied an interest in class more so than individual or sex interest" (quoted in Weiler, 2001, p. 82).

This interest in class is where I too had envisioned my research project to be. That is, poverty is what binds the young people in this school together and was therefore the starting point for analysis. Given the critical tradition I had grown out of, a focus on social class made sense. However, it quickly became apparent that there was a need to also attend to the fact that approximately two-thirds of the students were Aboriginal youth. Knowing that this is significantly higher than the numbers of Aboriginal people in the overall city population, questions necessarily arise regarding this high representation

within the population of early school leavers. Clearly there are socioeconomic questions. Why are so many of our inner city residents Aboriginal? That is, why are Aboriginal people disproportionately represented within the population of urban poor? Why are so many Aboriginal young people out on their own either living on the streets or in group-home settings? Clearly "race" is entwined with class in this context and needs to be an integral part of any analysis. So what does Freire have to offer then to a study such as mine? bell hooks (1994) points to his condemnation of colonialism and his position as a person from a neocolonial setting as providing something she could relate to and in fact caused her to engage in "a process of critical thought that was transformative" (quoted in Weiler, 2001, p. 75). While I too have been *transformed* by critical pedagogy I also consider how ICHS is shaped by critical pedagogy approaches and how a theoretical analysis is informed by critical thought.

Recently, I was asked to submit a proposal to present at a mental health conference. I wondered how best to frame my work as a mental health issue and felt it best to focus on the coding of behaviors required to accompany applications for special needs status for students. I asked one of the youth workers at the school to co-present to which he readily agreed. In discussions with the school principal about our proposal for the conference he talked about the *psychology of poverty* and the ways in which young people are affected, in early adolescence, by the recognition that their families are not like *other* families. Other families don't use the food bank or eat at soup kitchens. Other kids have bicycles, video games, new shoes, etc. Other families have parents who help with homework, don't drink, don't fight, etc. So they ask themselves, what's wrong with me? Why don't I have those things? Recently I've also wondered about ways to

incorporate the non-Aboriginal youth into my analysis. I've wondered about the concept of White privilege and how it affects White kids who *don't* have privilege. I guess in a sense disenfranchised White youth do have privilege because they don't experience racism along with the other insults of their lives. But if they are not experiencing the material and social benefits they see other White people have, does it add to that list of lacks?

Questions of class and "race' figured prominently in my proposal for candidacy as reflected my reading, writing, and thinking at that time. But what of gender? How does poverty differentially affect boys and girls? What are the effects of gender differences on classroom behavior and academic achievement? These questions were always at the back of my mind but took much longer to become central and integrated into a comprehensive approach. Why was that? I knew gender was important to my understandings of poverty yet it seemed I didn't have a clear focus to pursue gender questions based on my experiences of teaching at ICHS. I could see no clear differences in terms of current academic achievement. Attendance didn't seem to be affected by gender. I understood how those early processes of growing up in difficult circumstances had affected performance in schools but didn't understand how these students continue to be shaped by early experiences even though they were now in a *safe* school environment.

I began to research the concept of psychology of poverty, a process that refocused my thinking around both poverty and gender. Now the effects of teen pregnancy and single parenthood were *psychological* as well as material. Rather than simply noting that boys who are victims of abuse in the home become aggressive it is important to ask *why*. How does that experience affect the ways in which they think about themselves and their

place in the world? Once I added "race" to the analysis the questions changed again. What if we didn't view teenage pregnancy as a problem? It seemed possible that some of the young mothers in my study *wanted* to be mothers. It seemed some had made choices to begin a family. Some of the Aboriginal young people were together as couples and choosing to have children at a young (by my standards) age. I considered the possibility that maybe they were choosing to regain a family that they themselves hadn't had. Literature points to the importance of family and community in Aboriginal cultures. What if we considered that cultural values may be at play in a decision to begin their families? What if "at-risk" wasn't pathological? What if these youth had something to offer, something we could learn from them?

Hermeneutical action research.

Over the past several months I've come to an awareness of how my teaching practice at ICHS is firmly entrenched in my interpretations of my interview data. Clearly my understandings are based on my experiences in the school and the *wisdom* I've gained from reflecting on the interactions I've had with others within this school environment. I wondered how to go about placing myself into the research in a practical sense. My supervisor suggested the possibility that the process I had engaged in was in fact action research. Initially I said no. I hadn't gone through a conscious total process "in which a 'problem situation' is diagnosed, remedial action planned and implemented, and its effects monitored" (Burns, 2000). But as I thought more about it, I realized the idea that I had engaged in action research was worth pursuing. In my action research courses, years ago, I had been introduced to the idea that "research is not merely something that is done'

but rather is "included in the complexity of the researchers' lived experiences" (Sumara & Carson, 1997). Sumara and Carson suggest that rather than asking "How does one conduct action research?" we should instead ask, "How does one conduct a life that includes the practice of educational action research?" (p. xvii). So the question for me becomes, did I undertake my teaching in this way? Did my teaching co-evolve with my students and co-workers? Certainly the school's "action research" staff meetings are designed to facilitate the co-creation of understandings of teaching practice. In what ways did my teaching also reflect this approach? How did my students inform my teaching? How was knowledge and understanding produced? There are many ways I adapted my teaching to reflect new understandings that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. While my intent was to improve my critical practice, to understand and implement the messy ways of critical pedagogy, I now see that I engaged in a reflective action research process through my teaching.

The next question for me then is, does action research fit within my overall hermeneutical research framework? Is it appropriate within the parameters I have laid out in this chapter? I have outlined an orientation to philosophical hermeneutics as research method. "Hermeneutics is wary of method and technique as paths to understanding" while "action research relies on some methodological or procedural forms" (Smits, 1997). Brennan and Noffke (1997) add action research "is not merely a technique" but rather "a way to problematize many of the assumptions and practices of social research" (p. 23). Smits points out "the differences between hermeneutics and action research do not imply another irreconcilable gap between theory and practice (p. 282). The ways in which we understand in general can inform an understanding of action research as a lived

practice. While much has been written about youth "at-risk" and schooling, in what ways can this particular group of individuals and the *lifeworld* we share create possibilities for deeper interpretations of the types of knowledge that inform teaching in this context?

What enables understanding to emerge in practice? How has my ongoing process of teaching, reading, writing, and reflecting led to new knowledge becoming integrated into my practice as a teacher? Philosophical hermeneutics would argue that the *process* of coming to understanding is not what is important but rather what happens to us *in* the process. How do we remain open to experience and a process "that encompasses both previous and new meanings" (Smits, 1997, p. 286)? Action research occurs in dialogue with others "about how we should conduct ourselves and our practices – and how we should apply our understandings" (p. 286). How might hermeneutics help to shed light on current understandings in ways that allow for openness to our existing prejudices? How do we focus on the "unexpected" and learn from "one's own reading of an experience" (Britzman 1997)? What is "made strange in the process of implicating oneself in one's learning" (p. 69)? How might we rethink social categories of difference? The dialogical process of this dissertation opens up and explores the possibilities inherent in these questions. I situate my experiences as a teacher within this writing through a process of hermeneutical action research.

Summary

The interpretive methodological process I aim to engage in evolves out of understandings developed throughout recent years as a graduate student and reflections on the theorized person I have become. Theoretical ideas have spoken to me in various

ways beginning early in my Master's degree program. Critical theory was and continues to be an important organizing framework for my thoughts. I have also come to believe that social sciences must incorporate analytic and hermeneutic methodologies along with the reconstruction of historical materialism. A class analysis, while essential to socio-cultural theory, needs to be cognizant of the potential to essentialize groups through fixing identities such as disenfranchised. Specific intersections of culture, "race," gender, sexual orientation, and geographical location provide examples of the layers of hermeneutical analysis that are needed to disrupt essentializing portrayals of groups.

Theory must be grounded so that it evolves out of the experiences of people in their daily lives. A dialectical approach recognizes the potential for social change but also that social institutions such as schools have a reproductive function. Within this state organized power structure and cultural hegemony, individuals are shaped, yet also resist. A dialectical approach aims to further empower those who have been disenfranchised. This approach necessitates a critical consciousness of not only our students' lives but also our own lives.

This reflection on self and society reveals ways in which we can engage in transformative practices with students. Critical and feminist pedagogies rise out of particular political and theoretical movements that illuminate liberatory possibilities. Here we see integration of social visions into an analysis of macro issues such as the institution and ideology of public schooling. ICHS shares this social vision of an appropriate school program for disenfranchised urban youth as evidenced in the popular theater foundation upon which the school is built. Engagement in a critical process with youth helps us as educators develop awareness of our own positioning and the ways in

which our power and privilege have an impact on relations with students even in a school that strives to disrupt power relations.

The research I have undertaken is a case study of ICHS, a site chosen for its unique approach to teaching a specialized high needs population. An intensive description of this case, by highlighting multiple conversations and multiple realities, illuminates important understandings of school practices and the individuals who are an integral part of this research site. I anticipate relationships and variables that are new and different will emerge. Knowing this, I expect the research to go in unexpected directions but will be informed by my own teaching practice in this school and my prior socio-cultural understandings.

Hermeneutics provides a way of coming to self-understanding and informing directions for interpretive inquiry. Understanding my prejudices and allowing myself to be open to experience is ultimately the project of this dissertation. A hermeneutical inquiry is intended to bring about historical consciousness. It involves being open to risking our prejudices in dialogical encounters with others while reshaping and reinterpreting traditions. Hermeneutics then is not about objective understanding rather it is about understanding itself. Interpretation is an art, to be valued in the degree to which it connects wisdom to experience found in various texts. The interpretive process I will engage in connects my experiences as teacher and researcher to the expressions found in the texts offered by students and staff at ICHS along with relevant academic literatures. This integrated dialogue will be guided by the phenomenon being studied, the unique characteristics of ICHS, and will be shaped by movement between the whole and the parts. In this way, meaning is co-created through relationships.

Chapter 3: Framing the Story

> I cannot help but see you through my own culture's eyes. I have had the benefit of many kind and patient teachers from among you, and they have done their best, in their gentle and elliptical way, to lead me into clear vision, but my eyes are not yours. I am at least aware that I am largely *unaware* of your shadings and subtleties, of the real sophistication of your social structures. I will no doubt draw conclusions which you will find laughingly – or insultingly – incorrect. *I am convinced, however, that we have no choice but to start talking about such things* (Ross, 1991, p. xxiii)

> Understanding between persons is possible only to the degree that people can initiate a conversation between themselves and bring about a "fusion" of their different horizons into a new understanding which they then hold in common (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 193).

Introduction

How do I begin to tell a story about ICHS knowing from the outset that it is only one of many possible stories and that the story I tell will be different from the story you might tell? My story comes from within me. It grows out of who I am and why I have a desire to tell this story in the first place. Why was I drawn to the core of Edmonton's inner city and to education as a possible solution to social problems? For me, the awareness of social problems came first and an initial interest in sociology. It was an interest in people, in cultures, and in groups. Soon came an understanding that some groups were much more marginalized than others. Education became a way to start learning and teaching about and with others. It offered possibilities to understanding. Through my own education and teaching practice I have explored my understandings of how social class, "race", and gender intersect within larger societal processes to offer differing effects for different people. In this chapter I will explore these understandings through a look at educational programming at ICHS. My focus is on the uniqueness and

complexities of educational practice based on my belief that it is within these schooling practices that we need to begin to listen to youth who have been marginalized and begin to change our mainstream schools to better meet the needs of all students.

Inner City High School

Inner City High School is a provincially accredited, private, academic and arts based senior high school. The school provides opportunities for inner city youth to earn a high school diploma, develop skills that can lead to full-time employment, and prevent their return to a life on the street. A small school that serves approximately 60 students, ICHS is located inside the Boyle Street Community League in the heart of Edmonton's inner city. The school has struggled to create the opportunity for marginalized youth to extend the limits of their social reality by examining their experiences through a critical lens. Most students at the school are between the ages of 16 and 24 and have had a wide range of difficulties in schools, including gaps in their education ranging from a few months to several years. Most have attended many different schools due to the transient nature of their lives. Poverty is a primary concern for nearly all students, with the majority living independently or in group-homes. Over 50% of the students report Aboriginal heritage. Many would identify as "mixed race." Many students have had contact with the law. Additional factors contributing to the difficulties of succeeding in schools include drug use and addictions, homelessness, street involvement, violence, and struggles with depression.

The school objectives are aimed at engaging youth who have left public high schools due to conditions related to the social situations of their lives and prior schooling

reflective of Freire's (1989) interpretation of experiences "that make some students voiceless" (p. ix). A student explains how he felt in public school classrooms.

> *[I didn't like] the way I was treated because the teachers they'd always look at me and... when I needed their help they wouldn't help me and... [I] always had problems in school...[teachers were] always tripping out on me because I don't know... but they didn't have to do that though. (ICHS Student)*

Not only voiceless, but mistreated. Mistreated youth are "growing in environments where the seeds of discouragement" are planted (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002, p. 9). Joe Cloutier, the school's founder and principal, developed the ICHS program with a unique understanding of students who have had difficulties in public schools. His life story is similar to theirs in that Cloutier left school at age 15 and lived on the streets of inner city Toronto. "I left school without completing grade 9 and was sorry for much of my life" (Cloutier, 2005, p. 2). His love of learning and interest in inner city youth eventually led him to university to study education. Understanding, from personal experience, the reality and psychological pressures faced by many inner city youth, he acquired a formal education that he felt enabled him to help these youth succeed.

While incorporating many informal education approaches within school programming (e.g. Elders), Cloutier wanted to ensure a structure was in place that gave youth an opportunity to complete high school. He knew from personal experience that these youth were not lacking intelligence, just opportunities. Upgrading programs at ICHS take place with a "sincere respect for the natural intelligence of the youth in our programs" (p. 2). For me, this has raised an ongoing question – what does *real* respect

look like and how do I know when I have achieved it? Do I provide students in my class with the help that they need? Do I *listen* with the intent of fusing the horizons of our meanings *and* also with the intent of understanding who I am in relation to them? Do I ensure that when they leave *my* classroom they don't feel that I treated them badly or "tripped out" on them?

In this chapter I engage dialogically between "question and phenomenon" to reveal interpretations of ICHS programming and practices. Understandings "can be discovered only from the context" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 190) and through a process of interpretation that involves constant integration into ever expanding contexts. A discussion of ICHS accommodations for learning, critical practices, and funding considerations will provide a framework for the phenomenon being studied. Questions raised by students and staff, as well as through my teaching practice will interrogate the processes as practiced. Literature understandings raise additional questions.

Questions of Accommodations

Flexible approach.

The program at ICHS is designed to be flexible enough to meet the needs of its students while still meeting the demands of the Alberta curriculum. What is meant by flexible enough and demanding enough? First year teachers struggle to find a balance.

> *I'm either way over here or way over there. So it works for some kids, doesn't work for others. (ICHS Teacher)*

How do we see students "not as abstractions but as specific individuals" Schramm asks (2000, p. 68)? How do we begin a conversation with youth about meeting their needs

while we are already engaged, implicated, and consumed by an educational system that doesn't meet their needs? For example, the system includes many students who receive student finance. Student Finance regulations include minimum attendance and academic achievement levels. Students who don't meet these requirements have their cheques withheld by the school principal at the end of the month. Often homework assignments need to be completed before the cheque is released. If not, the cheque must be returned to Student Finance and the student is generally not eligible to reapply until the following term unless there are medical or extenuating circumstances. Often the student is left unable to pay their rent, creating an additional problem for a school that hopes to engage in critical discussions with youth. If the cheque becomes the motivator for completing assignments how do we move to a place of critical engagement in learning? How do we resist something of which we are a part?

> *Some of the kids get so frustrated cause they need their money so bad and you demand all this stuff from them cause they need their money. It's not cause they wanna do it, they're just doing it cause they need to get paid. (ICHS Teacher)*

> *She [a student] was so worried she was doing all her work and keeping up, keeping her attendance up. She was always worried and then she started noticing other students that weren't doing it and still getting their cheques, so she didn't. (ICHS Teacher).*

Being flexible so that students who are having personal difficulties can be accommodated then often has an adverse effect on other students who see that "rules" aren't consistent.

How do we promote *learning* while at the same time requiring students to adhere to accountability requirements of government agencies?

> *I think it comes down to its either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Like when you get the introductory kids it's like you have to give them praise and all those other things then it would come to intrinsic and you have somebody like [student's name] who has been through hell and back and she honestly wants to do it for herself. The girl's got a hundred and fifty two credits. Why is she doing that? Because she wants to learn. She wants to be here. (ICHS Teacher)*

A senior staff member frames the motivation problem as one of building confidence through academic success.

> *It's common to the students that we have, a lot of them haven't experienced academic success. And a lot of them are really smart but they just, for whatever reason missed school. Other concerns with their lives... so the literacy program attempts to play with subject matter that is of interest to the youth... that they can gain success. (ICHS Teacher)*

This quote starts to get at the desire to build a critical approach to learning but certainly in this inner city context the possibilities for critical learning are wrought with challenges that come with meeting the more immediate needs of urban youth. Accommodations are necessary in part because the formal education system assumes a certain kind of student, that is, a student who does not experience the level of difficulties faced by these youth in their personal, daily lives. Perhaps like Sommers (2000) we are "attempting to cross borders between the cultures of two pedagogies. No wonder things are painful and

unclear" (p. 127). And perhaps, as Schramm (2000) suggests, "we must teach the conflicts themselves" (p. 69) as a way to find answers about how to proceed.

Stephen Brown (2000) provides agreement with this thought in his critical literacy as practiced on an Athabascan Indian reservation in Alaska by looking at the "pedagogical implications of the local cultural conflicts associated with the environment and with schooling" (p. 182). Brown explored these conflicts in the classroom with students as "vehicles for the acquisition of academic and critical literacy" (p. 182). Perhaps conflicts that need to be explored initially at ICHS are those that define *success* through differing paradigms. What is important to these students in relation to schooling? For example, how do students define *success*? Are there cultural and gender variations in success as defined by students? What is particular about this *urban* context and how might schooling contribute to a *relevant* education? In what way might these youths' experiences reflect those of others who have lived in adverse conditions of poverty like Tupac a young Black rap artist, who "was always hungry for knowledge" yet found school deadening in its "effect of passing on irrelevant knowledge from one generation to another" (Dyson, 2001, p. 77). In his words, "I'm learning about the basics, but they're not basic for me" (p. 76). Tupac believed that schools should address the pressing social issues of the day and they should help youth confront the schooling and societal discords that directly affect them (Dyson, 2001).

For me, learning to be flexible was and is a difficult process. And, as I now see, there is much more than flexibility at issue. It also involves examining one's own beliefs and values. As a middle class parent I encourage my children to do their homework, hand assignments in on time, use their agendas, provide the "right" answers, and not to be late

for school. As a product of a teacher education program, I have learned to "manage" my classroom, maintain order (a degree of quiet), insist that deadlines be met, and impart "knowledge." So when I entered an environment where the values assumed by these practices weren't necessarily shared I became instantly frustrated. A senior staff member reflects on this difficulty.

> *We're kicking out a lot of the ways that teachers have been trained to deal with people... their feelings of well being come from this authority and we're saying no... (ICHS Teacher)*

A new teacher expresses her frustration.

> *You don't know where the lines are for some of the rules of this school cause they tend to get bent on a daily basis. (ICHS Teacher)*

I understood the difficulties some students had completing homework away from school. Many did not have stable home lives or even homes. Homework just didn't happen. That was easily rectified (at least in theory), by providing class time to complete assignments. But what about being on time, regular attendance, and the quiet, orderly classroom environment? It took much longer before I began to feel comfortable with chaos and longer still to appreciate the creative possibilities of "blunders" in practice and the critical reality of "messiness". My classroom teaching at ICHS has been consistent with what Tassoni and Thelin (2000) describe as "experiences that shook them up as educators" and how "experiences with particular students in particular classrooms continually shape and reshape what it means for them to be change agents in a democratic society" (p. 4).

So I now realize that it isn't just flexibility and messy practice that are at issue in teaching inner city students. Content is clearly at stake as well. While poverty has adversely affected the vast majority of ICHS students, questions of "race" and gender contribute to differing affects of poverty on students' experiences in schools. How do we get at the complexities within the student population of this particular site? What similarities are there amongst the experiences of inner city youth living in poverty regardless of culture and gender? Tupac suggests that classes on issues such as sex education, scams, and religious cults would explore general problems confronted by youth of all colors but police brutality, apartheid, and racism are of particular relevance to poor black and brown youth (Dyson, 2001). While he is getting at the similarities in experiences of poor youth of color, certainly these issues are important and relevant for discussions with a much wider audience. However, if we are to link personal experiences to schooling these issues could frame relevant discussions in the inner city school of this study. So topics need to be flexible as well, not just approaches. And we are reminded by Carr (2003) to keep in mind the positive and celebrate "the various strengths of human spirit" and people's "capacity to position themselves to overcome situational constraints" (p. 7) of poverty. In this inner city school can be seen many examples of the positive attitudes of young people and their hopeful visions of the future. These will be explored in detail later in this dissertation.

ICHS programming is designed to be flexible in order to meet the needs of individual learners. However, does this flexibility consider how issues of culture and gender could be incorporated into goals of academic success? For example, many young women in the school are mothers. Understanding these young women, as they would

want to be understood and as they understand themselves is of paramount importance to teaching and learning. How do we understand "the experience of being a pregnant teenager as a struggle *between* a girl and her world, not simply *within* an individual girl" (Luttrell, 2003, p. 3)? In what ways might this inform relationships with young mothers in school? How might we "perceive and respond to their positioning" as teen mothers and "work toward opportunities for positive social change" (Kelly, 2000, p. 9)? Could we do more as educators to challenge negative assumptions about young motherhood and value each as individuals in the classroom? Does the school accommodate particular needs for childcare and flexibility related to the demands of parenting? In what ways might critical discussions inform practice around the needs of young mothers? One student talked about childcare concerns.

> *The price of daycare is kind of high, even with subsidy... but it's okay, like she's well taken care of and she hasn't been sick too many times. If I need to I can bring her here [to the school]. (ICHS Student)*

This student also considered the difficulties of completing her homework

> *It's actually really hard because by the time I get home after school it's about five o'clock. I have to make her dinner, get her to eat, give her a bath, spend some time with her and then try to get her into bed which is not always easy. And then I'm so exhausted by that time it's really hard to get my homework done. Like sometimes I'll stay up really late to do it but most of the time I have to try to do it at school. (ICHS Student)*

The flexible approach at this school is helpful in terms of providing time and access to teachers throughout the school day to complete assignments. However, this student

identified other ways the school could address the needs of young mothers by providing opportunities for interaction with other mothers in the school.

> *I think it would be helpful to switch ideas and stuff... just to have a little bit of support... I just don't have time [to attend a Mom's and Tot's group] right now... there's just too much going on personally for me and plus with school and everything. (ICHS Student)*

The difficulties and time constraints of being a single parent make attending outside support activities difficult. Possibilities for school staff to explore include organizing group activities within the school day for students with children. Or better still, incorporate these issues into classroom discussions. This young woman's comments begin to reveal her struggles with the world around her rather than struggles within. It seems quite clear she is comfortable with her role and identity as a mother. Like Kelly (2000) finds in her study of young mothers, this woman "desired to take responsibility" (p. 216) and found a renewed sense of herself in demonstrating her competence as a parent.

In what ways do we, as educators, "collude with racial, gender, and class codes of conduct" that cast urban youth in a negative light and "neglect to examine our own assumptions about this or that 'type' of student" (Luttrell, 2003, p. 144)? For example, a new teacher at ICHS talks about students' adjustments to schooling.

> *I think he thinks he can change too. Like a lot of kids think they'll magically turn that button sometimes and be normal kids and attend regular school. (ICHS Teacher)*

What assumptions have teachers made about what is "normal" and what is a "regular" school? Should kids aspire to this *regular* model given the school they are currently attending is designed to address the deficiencies they experienced in *regular* schools? Do notions of *normal* suggest we are not valuing these youth and what they have to offer? How do we encourage teachers to evaluate their own subject positions as a precondition and ongoing component of emancipatory practice? This is a "necessary task if schooling is to help young people make and revise themselves in their own images rather than turning their self-definitions over to others" (p. 144).

According to recent stats, young Aboriginal women are living with spouses and/or having babies at younger ages than non-Aboriginal women. An issue to explore through critical practice is possible reasons behind these choices. Aboriginal parents "must cope with the legacy of colonialism, institutional racism, and poverty" (Kelly, 2000, p. 214). Kelly goes on to say, "I believe society should respect and support the right of young women to bear and raise their own children" (p. 214). It would seem that strong family values are inherent within Aboriginal cultures. In what ways might these values contribute to desires to establish a family? Are these choices precipitated by the disintegration of the families they grew up in and a desire to create something better for their own families? Anderson (2001) points out "contemporary Native women continue to value their role in influencing the future through the responsibilities and the authority they carry as mothers" (p. 211). Is early age of motherhood a cultural value for these girls? Are disconnections from school feeding these choices?

Strong ties to community have also been cited as central components of Aboriginal cultures. In a study in Phoenix, activist Indian women "felt uncomfortable

about identifying with feminism as it seemed to constrain them as members of Indian communities" (Hoikkala, 2001, p. 142). Reconnections to communities for the young women in this study need to be explored. These questions can only be considered through discussion with those who are central to the stories being told. In her discussion of Native womanhood, Anderson (2000) points out that "tribes see woman variously, but they do not question the power of femininity" (p. 36). She goes on to say, "the gendered nature of our tradition can be extremely damaging if interpreted from a western patriarchal framework" (p. 37). Positive changes in understanding occur when we begin to see "woman as a sacred life-giver and when we begin to live with the knowledge that children are sacred gifts from the Creator" (p. 194).

We also are reminded, by Lee and Lutz, (2005) that individuals hold "multiple, open, and porous subjectivities that are always under formation" (p. 12). The concepts of new ethnicities and hybridity offer non-essentailizing ways of considering how identities are formed and reformed through time and space. As Mahtani (2005) says, "occupying a space at the threshold of the margin can provide a perspective from which to consider the complexities of difference" (p. 89). This is an important consideration for those of varied histories who have come together under adverse conditions on the streets of inner city Edmonton.

Values.

A teacher talks about the need to promote values more conducive to academic success while balancing this approach with the need to increase confidence.

We try to build confidence, from an introductory program that is designed to address problems of literacy and numeracy that most youth (at ICHS) have. At the same time we try to instill attitudes that will lead to academic success like, if you want to get through school you have to come to school; and cooperation, respect for others, non-violence; most youth are used to dealing with conflict in violent ways. We try to show them that isn't always the best plan. (ICHS Teacher)

For me, an ongoing struggle is presented in this quote. Building confidence seems to require valuing the student's knowledge, primarily a street-wise knowledge. Aren't the attitudes needed for school success in direct contrast with the knowledge youth come to us with? Flexibility, as presented in the previous section requires giving many chances to students to complete homework, start and restart their programs, and work on behaviors conducive to formal schooling. This dichotomy raises the question though of how far teachers should go with giving chances. Young people also need to learn to take responsibility for their actions. Yet taking responsibility means adhering to the norms of broader society, norms that have rejected these youth who have in turn rejected them. How do we question value in both sets of norms? Tupac claims an escape from the unimaginative transmission of information in schools is "why the streets have taught me" (Dyson, 2003, p. 77). If this is reflective of the students in this study, then the values we seek to foster, the ones that lead to academic success are irrelevant to the very youth we hope to place on the path *to* success. In what ways can we reconcile this problem?

Certainly an awareness of it is a beginning. How do we situate this discussion within a critical framework? In public school settings we frame deviance as "the failure to obey group rules or norms" (Dotter, 2004, p. 3). Labeling disenfranchised urban youth

as deviant occurs through the dual processes of deviance and conformity. As Dotter points out, this labeling connects "the individual and social sides of the experience coin" (p. 4). Young people's experience of non-conformity now creates a tension for ICHS teachers who want to enable students to pursue a variety of options beyond high schools. These students have been shaped by a dominant schooling structure that has told them they do not measure up to the standards defined by middle class society. While challenging this notion, teachers are simultaneously preparing students to function within it. Discussions of this disjuncture and the power relations within it can inform a critical dialogue. In what ways have students' values been shaped by their experiences and how might these values help and/or hinder their academic progress? Maybe the answer to the dilemma of which sets of values to focus on is really a question. How do we engage *students* in these questions rather than making decisions on their behalf? As critical and feminist teachers, how do we reclaim power "to be exercised *with* rather than *over* students and exercised for self and social empowerment" (Gore, 1993, p. 120)? What light is shed by intersections of poverty, "race", and gender on questions of *values* in this context? What *knowledges* might we value in school that would be more conducive to building confidence in students?

Two Aboriginal graduates of ICHS who are currently employed as youth workers discuss questions of valuing contemporary and traditional cultural elements.

> *There's a huge street culture which is in turn gang culture which is in turn hip hop culture... they combine elements of Native culture into the hip hop culture... I agree with it but at the same point in time I don't... at least they're taking an interest and they're getting themselves off the streets... and doing something*

positive to present a message... but they're not going to grow up knowing their total culture... like what about the Sweetgrass ceremonies and the smudges and the Sweat Lodges. Are they going to learn that or are they going to learn to write raps and you know, spin on their head... (ICHS Youth Worker)

This quote begins to get at the complexities of contemporary urban culture for Aboriginal youth. Culture as practiced by these inner city youth takes on a variety of forms that grow out of lived experience. Questions about traditional and contemporary forms of cultural practice could inform classroom discussions of issues such as poverty, "race", and gender.

The other youth worker talks about her brother and what she views as his positive engagement with hip hop.

He enjoys music and has recently taken an interest in the hip hop culture. And in himself and his own Native culture which he never really touched on before because of the racism that he felt, plus he's gay. He's... producing rap songs that he writes himself that are influenced by his Native culture, by hip hop culture, and by the gay community. (ICHS Youth Worker)

In conversation with the other youth worker she went on to say that her brother's form of expression is a good thing, enabling him to voice his hybrid identity. Whose values are we promoting when we leave aside these discussions about difference? How might we come to appreciate difference from a perspective that understands "that your difference informs and enriches me, gifts and honours me" (Armstrong, 2005, p. 32)? Can we begin to challenge notions of "race" through historical understandings "that 'race' begins with

the fundamental premise that someone thinks they have more of a right to truth or to power" (p. 32)?

Challenging the values that are entrenched in systems of colonization that "created the kind of systemic violence that continues in this country" (p. 33) becomes an important goal for classroom practice. How do we challenge these systemic problems while encouraging the positive cross-cultural values that youth in this study hold? An Aboriginal youth worker reflects on the misunderstandings we hold of each other.

> *So they're in turn saying, you know, "Oh you're Native and you're poor and I'm not going to talk to you, I'm going to pick on you. But then on the reverse side the Native person is saying, "Well, that's typical, every white man does it, look at the," and then that promotes both sides. That's just feeding racism." (ICHS Youth Worker)*

It seems that through critical practice we can begin to accept the values of togetherness that these youth want while exploring difficult questions surrounding the social conditions of their lives.

Alberta Learning's (2001) goals for removing barriers for "at-risk" students include making "high school fit the student, not the student fit the high school" (p. 30). An acknowledgement of the structures in the public system that make this goal difficult can be seen in the report's focus on "alternative delivery methods, occupational training opportunities, just-in-time remedial instruction and other supports to at-risk students" (p. 30). Add-ons or band-aid solutions are much more possible than restructuring the system to make it effective for all students. It is this lack of flexibility in the public system that

has led ICHS to become a private school. It is the belief that the school should fit the needs of the students that informs ICHS.

> *We try to individualize a program as much as possible. Most of the students who come to the school have serious issues to overcome just to get here. And we need to be respectful of that. At the same time, manipulation is one of the tools that the youth have used to get through their life and we also need to be mindful of that. (ICHS Teacher)*

In my own teaching practice I have tried to find a balance somewhere between being flexible enough to accommodate individual needs while minimizing the ways I may be manipulated by those who take advantage of this flexibility.

One particular student, Dan, continues to haunt my thoughts and I wonder if I did what was best for him. Dan struggles with drug abuse. At times drug use has been less of a struggle for him, other times more. When I first met Dan he seemed to have it somewhat under control. He had been attending ICHS for quite some time and had generally done well. He had completed a number of courses and displayed strong academic skills. He had also learned how to manipulate. As his drug problem intensified, his manipulation skills increased. In my Social 20 class he rarely attended. I encouraged him to complete the work he had missed. I was encouraged at staff meetings to give him many chances. He never completed much of the work but managed to pass the course. His manipulation skills won out in the end. So what had we taught him? What had he learned about survival in the world? Eventually he took the rent money and bought crack cocaine – his roommate ended up out on the street (as did he). Should I have been less flexible? Should I have implemented strict deadlines? Did my desire to "fix" him prevent

me from seeing what he had to offer? What could I have learned from him about myself? How might we have kept a conversation going? The structures of the formal education system, in this case curriculum, limit the possibilities for social change along with a pedagogical approach that restricts the possibility for seeing how life outside of school could be accommodated within the bounds of curriculum.

As I read over what I have just written I realize I didn't have much of a conversation going with Dan. It seems easier with the students who are new to the school – the ones I can engage through the literacy program. Without a rigid curriculum to get through I am able to consider the life experiences of my students and incorporate their understandings into reading, writing and discussions. So how has the Social 20 curriculum led me away from critical practice and how might I use it to better *know* youth such as Dan? What did he want out of school? What did he need from us? What of his drug use? What did it mean? Certainly there are many reasons for drug involvement. Often drugs are used as painkillers in order to forget the many problems of day-to-day life. Lau (1989) reflects, "What is this pain, that it needs to be obliterated? Drugs have become too important to me. I can't even figure out why anymore, except that the idea of being straight for even an instant is intolerable" (p. 209). Maybe my interpretation of Dan is too harsh. Maybe Social 20 wasn't what he needed in his life right then! Often marginalized youth become part of a subculture where acceptance is conditional on continued drug use (Hartnagel, 1992; O'Dowd, 1993). Drug taking can be an affirmative action indicative of taking control of a situation. In what ways could the reasons for involvement with drugs lead to classroom discussions about power and the lives of inner

city youth? How do we accept and, in fact, see the usefulness of what we can learn from drug use?

One of the youth workers at the school reflected on what might be immediately apparent to a new student and the factors that would encourage them to continue attending school long enough for staff members to engage in conversations.

> *A very different attitude compared to other schools, that's more of acceptance and an effort towards understanding and not being judgmental. Shortly afterwards you realize all the provisions that are being made and the care that's being given when you first walk into the school." (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Poverty, homelessness, unstable living conditions, and lack of positive adult involvement in their lives are some of the factors that make settling into school routines difficult for most students at ICHS.

School staff endeavors to be accepting and caring in their interactions with youth. A student explains how important these relations were to her success,

> *(the staff) were really supportive of me...they always tried to help me even though I was not even really serious about school and they still tried to encourage me...they always take you back, no matter what...I've gone through a lot of shit and it's helpful to have someone that cares about you, tries to help you even though you haven't been as good, the best person or made the best choices...they still accept you and are willing to help you. (ICHS Student)*

This student clearly understands and appreciates that staff genuinely care about her. But what does she mean when she says "the best person or made the best choices"? When

teachers and youth workers strive to be "non-judgmental" are they in fact supporting a belief that some lifestyle *choices* are preferable to others? While some lifestyle choices are clearly detrimental to the well being of the young person, how do we co-create understandings of "best person" or "best choices" that acknowledge the difficult circumstances in which those choices were made? And the fact that choice isn't equally distributed in society (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). Rather than being non-judgmental, could we recast these relations through an examination of our own values?

Alberta Learning (2001) completed a study that explored the causes of early school leaving and made recommendations that support what the student above is saying. Listening to and supporting students, who are dealing with complex problems in their lives, is important for "at-risk" students (Alberta Learning, 2001). Many students start and stop the program a number of times before being able to establish a routine of coming to school regularly.

> *I've been coming here off and on since I was about 15 or 16....I was going to (school name) at the time and then I quit....it was just hard....then I stayed [here] for awhile and I got into some legal problems so I had to leave. That same year I came back again after it kind of cooled out and then went through some more legal problems and I couldn't come back here again. And then I left for a couple years and I came back, this is my third year. So I came back a little while ago and decided I wanted to get my diploma and I want to go to university and stuff so I stayed here since. (ICHS Student)*

A youth worker explains how they support students through many difficult situations in their personal lives.

A friendlier, warmer environment....designed to make everybody feel like they're safe. Once they come through the doors they shouldn't have to worry about anything else, violence or drugs or anything like that. (ICHS Youth Worker)

Students need this safe haven, a place to go where they are accepted and protected from the violence and difficult circumstances of their lives outside the school.

Young people "living in inner-city areas are exposed to alarmingly high rates of violence as both witnesses and victims" (Luthar, 1999, p. 70). Children living in poor, tough neighborhoods in Edmonton have been shown to experience stress leading to increased and ongoing fear (Mah, 2001). Given that "violence exposure is linked with various problems including depression, substance use, and academic problems" (Luthar, 1999, p. 71), what can we be doing to build these understandings into classroom practice? How can we use this safe haven as a platform for discussions around issues of violence in the community?

This support for students and an awareness of difficult relations urban youth have experienced with authority figures in the past follows through to classroom and general school practices.

Staff (are) called by their first names, they're not pushing authority on you. They're treating you like a human being and they're not putting you in a conditional place where three strikes you're out necessarily but rather one where we give many chances. (ICHS Youth Worker)

A senior teacher reflects further on youths' experiences in public schools.

They usually are put in programs or courses intended for behaviour problems because they're not able to meet the standards for school and as a result they act out, they've poor attendance, and it's just a recipe for disaster. (ICHS Teacher)

In a focus group discussion with students one young man expressed his concern with his public school experience, an experience echoed by all the youth in the group.

The thing I didn't like about public schools was a lot more people, that the teachers have less time to focus on you or individuals in the class that need the extra attention... like select, selective students and all that in high schools and junior highs and all that...

Question: Like certain students get the attention

Yeah

Question: And others don't

Because they do a lot better or whatever there's, the one person just needs a pat on the back or keep trying sort of thing. (ICHS Student)

Gamoran (2000) highlights this problem of unequal attention from teachers by pointing out that differences in grade scores within schools are higher than differences between schools. He points to streaming students into separate classes or into ability groupings within a class as a significant part of the problem with teachers having higher expectations for those in higher level groups or classes. When classes are taught at low levels, as is often the case in high poverty schools, students tend to respond less energetically, are more likely to misbehave in class, and less likely to do their homework.

These thoughts seem to support what teachers and students at ICHS are saying. However, does the student quoted above have a particular understanding of "select

students" who get the attention? Often these youth point to school size and large classes as reasons for why they couldn't get the help they needed to complete their school work. While on some level they seem to understand that "select students" are not youth who share social circumstances such as theirs, they also don't want to explicitly say so. As one teacher said, "these are not victims that come to us, these are people who have survived situations that would get the better of most of us" (ICHS Teacher). My experience with these youth, as both teacher and researcher, suggests to me that they do not view themselves as victims and tend not to point out the inequalities and injustices in the world around them. Here is an important consideration when adopting a critical approach. Building on the positive strengths of youth in an analysis of social structures leading to positive social action lessens the dangers of youth developing a view of themselves as victims. Certainly an understanding of the concept of victim could frame a critical discussion.

Critical Practices

> Pedagogical moments arise in specific contexts: the social location of the teacher and students; the geographical and historical location of the institution in which they come together; the political climate within which they work; the personalities and personal profiles of the individuals in the classroom; the readings selected for the course; and the academic background of the students all come together in ways that create the specifics of the moment (Lewis, 2000, p. 104).

As a teacher at ICHS I have had much opportunity to engage in and reflect on critical practice. I see struggles both within myself to find appropriate methods to engage youth in the classroom, and between the philosophical ideals underpinning the school's foundational beliefs and the lack of awareness of the importance of these practices by many of the school's newer teachers. In terms of my own teaching, over time I developed

understandings and approaches that seemed to offer possibilities to engage new students within literacy courses.

Bridging courses.

Initial courses are intended to bridge gaps between a student's prior schooling and the academic high school stream they are being readied for.

> *We have a lot of bridging courses that can accommodate people individually so that they can get an academic diploma even if they have missed gaps because we have students come here that have missed all of junior high (ICHS Teacher)*

These courses utilize drama, photography, video, reading, and writing to explore the social issues in their lives while at the same time developing literacy skills. Initially many students look at the school and surrounding community as focal points for photography and descriptive writing. Theoretically, they then move to examine these objects more critically through questioning and dialogue with other students and staff.

> *I think we really try to look at the way of the world as well as [the ways] the youth that come here manipulate it in order to survive. And I think we look at how they have been maybe manipulated by the world and the structures that they're up against. And we deliberately have elements within our literacy program to help us discuss those issues. Like we'll watch a movie because it's an in to talking about how the world is not a fair place. (ICHS Teacher)*

While senior staff members consistently reflect an understanding of a critical approach to literacy courses, my own experience is that learning to engage students in this way requires careful reflection and refocusing through many "blunders" and learning from

what might be viewed as "mistakes". In part, as Rosenthal (2000) learned from what she viewed as her own failure, "you cannot just put your chairs in a circle and assume you have a feminist classroom." (p. 107). I too was trying to teach critical awareness "in a conventional, dictatorial, hierarchical classroom, and it just doesn't work" (p. 107). Senior staff members are aware of how this problem impacts teachers who are new to the school.

> *The teacher training programs at universities are intended to train teachers to operate in the traditional system... there's nothing that I know of in the teacher training program to prepare teachers to work with a population that we work with... every time we have a new teacher there's a whole learning curve. (ICHS Teacher)*

The learning curve is complicated by a resistance on the part of new teachers based on a preconceived notion of what a teacher should be, a role defined as "managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns" (Giroux, 1988, p. 122). Learning anew requires disregarding many ideas about teaching that are fundamental to teacher preparation programs and instead developing an understanding of "teachers as transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens" (p. 122). For me, the learning curve, while significant, is somewhat shortened by a prior understanding of critical pedagogy and ongoing engagement with graduate studies in the discipline of this population and particular school practice.

Recently, while substitute teaching at ICHS I stumbled upon a video that worked well as a teaching tool. I had been frustrated by what seemed to be young people's obsession with Tupac, who I viewed simply as a long since deceased American rap artist. In trying to focus themes on what interested youth, they continually returned not only to Tupac but the same lyrics and "Gangsta" images. I wondered how to spark some interest in a different topic, refocus on something else, anything else! Then, as I wandered through the video store one evening, I spotted a video called "Tupac Resurrection." I thought, okay… why not have a look at it – something like, if you can't beat them join them. As I watched it later that night I realized its significant potential as a critical literacy tool. In the video, Tupac discusses many issues relevant to the lives of inner city youth. No wonder they relate so strongly to him, "a highly prized and privileged icon in life as well as in death" (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 94).

Introducing the video as a springboard for discussion leading to writing, one student offered that she too had written a poem on some of the same themes Tupac has written about as she too had lived through similar experiences. A great beginning I thought. On the second day of our new Tupac unit I wrote the following in my journal:

> I had three new [male] students today for English/Literacy class which changed the dynamics in the room considerably. I must admit I was hesitant at first when I saw and spoke with the three of them. They looked a bit "rough." Three "gentler" female students were missing at the same time – a significant change in the mix. However, the three new students were immediately interested when they realized we were to watch "Tupac." I explained the educational significance of what we were doing (media analysis leading into writing) and launched into a discussion based on what we had watched yesterday (the first 30 minutes). There were the usual groans and "let's just watch the movie" but they were quickly engaged in discussion – topics they know much about and are interested in. Tupac talks about his mother's drug use (crack cocaine). Both Braydon and Tonya responded with stories of their own mothers' drug use. Braydon said his mother uses cocaine and Tonya said marijuana was acceptable in her mother's house when she was growing up. Now that she has a baby of her own she realizes she doesn't want

> him to grow up that way but recognized that the drug use around him will be an influence. My hope is that their willingness to talk about the issues and tell their personal stories will mean a greater willingness to write about them later on. (February 4, 2005)

So what had I learned about my own teaching practice on this particular day? While being hesitant to explore personal issues, possibly opening wounds in the classroom, I also believe "it requires difficult emotional work from them and from me" (Lewis, 2000, p. 87). Through this process both I, and my students develop understandings of our own experiences that can be brought to bear on transformations of our lives. Certainly my teaching has been transformed through my interactions with them, but in what ways are they transformed through understandings of their own life experiences? How do they understand these experiences and what do they do with this knowledge? How has this interaction shaped my understandings? And how might I take this discussion further in the classroom?

I've wondered about the emancipatory potential of including Aboriginal hip hop in classroom discussions. Rap groups such as Alberta's War Party make connections between the social problems underlying American rap music and the social problems that inform their own music. "This is our ghetto," says Omeosoo, or Kool-Ayd the Chubby Cree, as he calls himself onstage (McCoy, 2002, para. 4). He talks about Hobbema as "the hood," a place that is anything but an idyllic rural setting. "More and more young aboriginals, especially those on the reserves, are equating their experiences with the lives of young people in the black ghettos. It's a world they're exposed to through the mass media, and their *[sic]* adopting the look and the music of that culture." Aboriginal hip hop groups are also bridging gaps for an increasingly urban Aboriginal population, giving voice to issues of economic and social deprivation. Rex Smallboy, of War Party reflects

on "people who have had their pride and dignity assailed for generations" and how "hip hop gave me a voice to express those issues" (Elaschuk, 2002, para. 7). "It also became a healing tool that showed me how to move on with life and have a positive attitude". It seems there may be an opportunity to use the opening Tupac creates to then move Canadian Aboriginal rap into the classroom as a springboard for discussions of local issues that effect these youth directly.

Teacher learning curve.

Concerns expressed by senior staff members regarding the learning curve of new teachers were followed up in a focus group discussion. I wondered how new teachers experienced their transitions to the school so began a conversation with them by asking for reflections on these experiences. One teacher commented:

> *I'm easy-going and soft spoken but I'm a hard ass, so it's hard to let go. (ICHS Teacher)*

This teacher sees the need to adjust her approach as indicated by her words about letting go but maybe doesn't appreciate the reasons for it. New teachers do however understand the student population and some of the structural violence in the lives of students as reflected in the following comment.

> *This environment has made me a little more open to people in that situation. (ICHS Teacher)*

By "that situation" she considers poverty, homelessness and drug addictions but seems to have greater difficulty connecting these issues to school practices.

I personally would want a little more leadership... maybe a little more for a new teacher... I haven't learnt by trial and error yet... and that doesn't make me comfortable. You get whisperings from the other staff of what you can and can't do. (ICHS Teacher)

She is looking for direction that, in a critical approach, should come from within. The idea of critical pedagogy or any understanding of critical practices in the school did not come up in discussions with these new teachers.

In terms of transition courses their concerns were frustrations with having to accommodate students who start the program late.

She kinda came in late. I think she came in like right around Christmas time or just after. And she skipped out on all that so, she missed a few steps. (ICHS Teacher)

These teachers are aware of the importance of bridging courses in terms of skill development prior to beginning their academic courses. They see that students who have "missed a few steps" have difficulties later on.

She came in and she's got the worst reading skills. We never got a time to actually teach her how to read and understand. We just put her in math and science and CTS. (ICHS Teacher)

While recognizing the value of increased skill levels, these teachers did not indicate any awareness of the existence of critical and democratic practices or "the ability of human beings to come to a knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world and the assumption that both the content of the curriculum and methods of pedagogy teach lessons" (Weiler, 2001, p. 68). Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) remind us the

practice of teaching is characterized by categories that organize thinking into areas such as content, activities through which students are to learn, and the teacher's role in facilitating the acquisition of knowledge. Particular beliefs about learning are presumed to be common sense and learning is simply a matter of acquiring curricular content. Given this understanding it is not surprising that these early service teachers at ICHS did not indicate awareness of alternative ways of learning.

The need to accommodate youth who come in late, or in fact at any time throughout the term is a reality of educational practice in this inner city context. Many youth are referred to the school by group home staff or through the justice system. The need to be in a program is immediate and can't always be held off until a new term starts when it would be more convenient from a school programming perspective. Many students also often start and stop numerous times before being able to establish a routine of coming to school. Some of the bridging courses are set up to try and accommodate this need.

> *We have it set up so that they can work intensely on a credit and if you miss a certain amount you can come back and pick up where you were at so it's fairly self directed. And hopefully there's enough staff so that you can work continuously... and hopefully get a credit. And we do include some of the competency based computer credits. Which means that if that is a strength for you, you can get credits very quickly. (ICHS Teacher)*

This senior teacher reveals some of the messiness of practice in schooling for these urban youth and this school's attempt to overcome the difficulty of students who "consistently will have to take several runs at it" (ICHS Teacher). The benefits of a program that

provides enough flexibility for these students include an opportunity to experience success.

> *It gives them a sense of accomplishment... a lot of the kids that have come here haven't experienced any kind of success, be it through a job or anything... they complete two or three credits and they're beaming. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

A senior teacher elaborates.

> *... the use of the arts is critical in our work because the use of the arts allows us to address academic deficiencies in a way that allows students to maintain some sense of dignity and self worth and also promotes their confidence at the same time. We're able to move towards the academic courses and feel good about the whole process rather than putting them into a reading program that highlights their deficiencies. (ICHS Teacher)*

But what of critical practice? Aren't we now saying that building confidence through *skill* development is what is important? Is a focus on skill development inconsistent with the goals of emancipatory pedagogy? Certainly we need to build confidence but doesn't it need to come from an awareness of self and society? There is a tension revealed here between the broader goals of emancipatory education and the narrow goals of skill development in schools.

What would a dialogic pedagogy look like if it were set up to meet the needs of students whose attendance is inconsistent? This is a question I have grappled with in my own teaching as reflected in the following journal entry.

> These last two days have been exciting listening to them [my students] talk. I hope they all come back, even though I know the larger numbers make it more difficult, but I want to take them further and see their writings and hopefully engage (at least some of them) in further studies. (February 4, 2005)

I understood the great possibility of not seeing some of these students again or at least not the next day. I also understood that some would continue for a while, and then leave and possibly not come back. Some days are better than others. Some days, there is a need to begin again, getting to know the students in my class. But maybe this isn't a problem. Maybe there's some creative possibility in new groupings of students, new ideas, new conversations. But is there a need to build trust before people will open up in the group? Can trust be established quickly? It seems that for me the new students were willing to share their personal stories on their first day in the school when it was prefaced by Tupac's story. Did Tupac make it okay? Did I make it okay? If so, how do I continue to make it okay? In what ways might this momentary *success* be reflective of "deeper tensions between the roles of teacher and student as they struggle for a culture of democracy" (Thelin & Tassoni, 2000, p. 1)? How might my teaching be informed by an understanding that the tensions are an ongoing and natural part of day-to-day classroom relations in this context? How could I explore with my students "the construction and effects of my own pedagogical practices" (Gore, 1993, p. 142)? Given that my role as teacher in the classroom puts me in an undeniable position of authority, how might I produce a non-hierarchical classroom? Gore suggests using her authority as a teacher educator "to engage my students in explorations of pedagogy" (p. 143). What might my students' vision of a democratic classroom look like? How might they have solved the *problem* of too much Tupac?

Building relationships.

A youth worker reflects on the importance of establishing relationships with youth.

> *If I come across being too hard or too firm I stand a chance of losing any rapport I might have with the kids. (ICHS Youth Worker)*
>
> *They've faced so much adversity in their lives they don't know who they can trust. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Beyond initial welcoming approaches there are some longer-term considerations in this environment.

> *I'm very open... I tell them, it's only fair... they're letting me know stuff about them, anything they want to know they can ask me... that helps with the trust too. They can relate to the fact that I had to go through a series of steps through my life which brought me to this point... I can relate to them with their situations. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

This quote gets at the idea that we ourselves are a part of these relationships. It isn't just the students' experiences that are important. Our stories need to be shared as well. A collaborative approach gets at a pedagogy that is concerned with "instructional processes and changing relationships and interactions among class members" (Gore, 1993, p.146). How do we move this approach into the classroom to facilitate exploration of shared social realities? This Youth Worker believes he relates well to youth in part because he has shared experiences similar to those many of these students are currently experiencing. Students support this understanding.

[Youth Worker's name] has went through a lot of crap. Like he knows everything that's happened to me in my life and he's just helped me actually stay, like he's actually convinced me a couple times from leaving. (ICHS Student)

[Teacher's names]... they all come from fairly rough backgrounds. So they really connect... They know pretty much what we're going to go through during our time here and they're really interested in helping. They treat you like a person. (ICHS Student)

So what of me, and my middle class background? How do these students perceive me and do they think I understand them? I wonder if it is just the common shared experiences or is it also a way of interacting that students appreciate. Is it important to share one's own story even if it is a different story? Is meaning co-created through this process? How do I represent myself to them? White? Middle class? Academic? Friend? I wrote the following in my journal.

> I wrote quotes up on the board and they chose one to write about. Most wrote something. Don wrote a paragraph on his drug use – told me there was a lot more to the story about his family but he wasn't going to write it because it's stuff he doesn't want anyone to know. (February 8, 2005)

I let it go. In retrospect I shouldn't have. The fact that he told me that much seems to be an indication he might have talked about it in some way. Maybe I should have told him there were things about my family I don't want people to know either. Things that are uncomfortable to talk about. Like my father's alcoholism and what it was like to grow up in our emotionally stifled household. A bridge could have been built between his experiences and mine – a platform from which to create new meanings, new understandings - a way to tap the creative potential of our differences. This approach is of course contrary to the ways in which teachers are constructed both within teacher

preparation programs and within public schools. It offers a possibility for teaching against the grain through 'refusal to fit ourselves within the existing practices" of schools. (Simon, 1992, p. 30).

Students clearly appreciate, at least with time, the relationships they have with staff members at the school. They point to these relationships as an important component of ICHS. They also point to daily sharing circles, a process that reflects what Young (2006) identifies as being used to "build community, make decisions, and heal wrongdoing" (p. F9).

> *I like the fact that the students have a say in the school rules and what goes on and what kinds of things they'll be doing, stuff like that. And that the courses are mostly based on what the majority of the students need to know to graduate. (ICHS Student)*

So voice in their view is something they have in daily sharing circles but classrooms are focused on getting through required course work. I reflect on my following journal entry.

> In Literacy we began with a short discussion about respect. Given that we are talking about personal and sensitive issues it becomes difficult if some are talking, laughing, making rude remarks. This will be a long process to move toward genuine respect but we may have made slight inroads. (February 8, 2005)

It wasn't so much a discussion – rather a speech – by me. Wow, talk about a lack of fusion of theory with practice - a disrespectful approach to a discussion of respect! Why not "talk to the class about the class" (Rosenthal, 2000, p. 117)? Attempts to "handle" the class are inconsistent with what students in this study have said they appreciated about the school. Further consideration would lead to *real* voice in the classroom.

The arts.

So how do we get to this place of shared voice and visions as reflected in classroom approaches and themes? Critical questioning is adopted at ICHS through "the arts and ….the literacy program [that are used] to look at the world around us" (ICHS Teacher). Teachers and administrators could better meet the needs of disenfranchised urban youth by approaching "students as bearers of diverse social memories with a right to speak and represent themselves in the quest for learning and self determination" (Giroux, 1994, p. 279). Critical pedagogy should promote the creation of students, teachers, and administrators who are able to negotiate within the terrains of popular culture to constantly remake their own identities (Weaver & Daspit, 1999). Okay, but how does this work in practice? Through popular media, students can challenge power blocs while creating alternative visions of the world. At ICHS this challenge is often approached through

> *...digital media and also basic photography...gives somebody a purpose to go out into the community and look at it. I mean literally looking at it through a lens that you also have something between you and the community and you have a stake there that not everyone else has...once they're given that prop they would go out and really look at the community with a different purpose...they have a role that's valid within the community...suddenly they have a place within the community...and at the same time they're not a part of it. They're separate so they can really look at it from the other side...it gives them a power they haven't had before. (ICHS Teacher)*

In what ways do students use this medium to critique the messages in the world around them and consider alternative representations of the images they see? Photography provides not only opportunities to view the world critically but also allows students to name and talk about the community of which they are a part. Does this happen effectively in practice at ICHS and in particular does my teaching incorporate these opportunities?

> A bit of a goof up on my part with the disposable cameras. I left them in the back classroom when I left in a hurry yesterday and only two remained when I arrived today. A good reminder to be more careful – especially with the digitals. (February 8, 2005)

What alternative representations might there be of the almost empty bag? What image is created for me? I screwed up? I didn't screw up? So what of the community of which we are a part? Does that include the folks who took the cameras? I now think so, and think I should have incorporated this discussion into that day's teaching. A blunder becomes a bungle by failing to recognize the almost empty bag as an opportunity. Sommers (2000) points out that "opposed to the concept of blunder, which carries some significance for future change, is the bungle, a mistake that leads nowhere productive" (p. 126).

My initial thought was that I made a careless mistake, not a serious one but one that shouldn't be repeated. End of story. But this type of mistake, not a teaching one per say, can still be illuminating. This incident might have been used as an opportunity to view the world more critically, a teachable moment. What could the empty bag have represented? How might the students have viewed the bag? The cameras were theirs anyway – that is, they were for use in our class by them. The school pays for photo finishing so what was the benefit to taking the cameras? They would then have to either admit they took the cameras or pay for film developing. Did they think any of these questions through? Is it just that the cameras were accessible so why not take them? Why

do I now think I can't leave cameras unattended? Why not solve the problem in class and establish trust so that I *could* leave cameras lying about? What if we developed an understanding of *community* that placed all of us at the center with cameras being shared property of the class? Would it work? I think it would be worth a try. An important understanding for me is that the school exists to meet the needs of urban youth who did not have their needs met in the public school system. How do we impart the understanding that we wish to be thought of *differently* in contrast to their prior schooling experiences with teachers and have a sincere desire to help them succeed? That is my thought but what would theirs have been? How about the almost empty bag as a metaphor? Might it frame a discussion about the inner city? What is the message in the two cameras left behind? In what ways could what was left be used to refill the bag?

Intersections (of 95th Street and 105A Avenue).

What happens when we start looking through the lens at Edmonton's inner city? I see poverty, homelessness, a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people, drugs, violence, children playing in parks littered with needles, struggles to get by, positive shimmers of light here and there, smiles, and people who look unhealthy to me. My partner and I decided a few years back to volunteer, with our children, at an annual inner city New Year's Day dinner. We're part of the dessert crew. Our children, now aged 10, 12 and 14 like this job because it allows them to hand out candy to the kids and carry trays of desserts to the tables. They find people are friendly when you approach with sweets to offer. I find they are friendly anyway - always a cheery hello. Even though I have worked in the inner city I find I learn new things about myself from this experience.

I notice similarities, like mothers who don't want their children to have sweets until they have eaten their meal. Why would I even notice that? Isn't it obvious that children should eat the healthy stuff first? Did I expect something different? Did I think because they are poor they might not hold the same hopes and concerns for their children? As Kelly (2000) reminds us "prevailing ideologies of the good mother and the good father can yield destructive consequences, especially for poor people" (p. 218). Equating "good" parenting with a three-bedroom bungalow in the suburbs fails to recognize historical conditions of colonialism, institutional racism, and cycles of intergenerational poverty.

In Edmonton, many urban families lack the basic necessities of life. Many of these families are included in the 52% of all Aboriginal children in Canada who are poor. According to the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (2001) some effects of this poverty are low self-esteem, depression, anger, self-doubt, intimidation, frustration, shame, and hopelessness. One of the Youth Workers at ICHS, who grew up in poverty in Edmonton's inner city, talks about how he sees this process unfolding.

> *...being an Aboriginal myself, knowing how it feels to be placed in that situation when you're called dirty Indian and you know you see the people who drink out on our benches...and when someone says, "Indian" the first thing that comes to a person's mind is a stereotype of what they see out here. So when these kids grow up with that, they perceive that and they come to think that's all they're going to be. So it's almost like they give up on themselves you know because they think, "Well I'm just an Indian anyways so what's the point." (ICHS Youth Worker)*

This quote indicates a process whereby inner city Aboriginal youth come to construct themselves outside of the 'norm" of mainstream society. But what is he really saying in

these words? Starting with "the people who drink out on our benches." How did they get there? What are the historical relations by which social conditions and attitudes were created toward "people of different cultures, people of another skin colour, and people of other lands" (Armstrong, 2005, p. 32) who became colonized in a class-structured society? In creating "the kind of systemic violence that continues in this country" (p. 32), what have we done to these urban youth?

This Youth Worker is pointing clearly to the intergenerational effects of these societal conditions on this population. How do we best educate youth who believe "I'm just an Indian anyways so what's the point"? A "critical psychology" is involved in "raising consciousness" (Carr, 2003, p. 10) and needs to be a part of critical discussions with these youth. Literature on Aboriginal youth and schooling emphasizes the importance of validating identities and incorporating spirituality into formal education programs (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2002). To what extent does a critical pedagogy framework allow that to happen for Aboriginal youth who are disenfranchised? Is a program that is relevant for disenfranchised Aboriginal youth also relevant for disenfranchised non-Aboriginal youth? Are gender differences addressed within this type of approach?

Graveline (1998) offers a pedagogical approach she calls "First Voice" as a tool that "arises out of anti-racist, feminist, experiential and Aboriginal discourse" (p. 118). First Voice grows out of personal experience and our own interpretations of those experiences to guide our knowledge base. First Voice is rooted in identity and authority, and as critical pedagogy challenges, "why and how certain voices/enunciatory positions are privileged over others" (p. 124). How does critical pedagogy at ICHS provide this

opportunity? A popular theater approach was adopted because it allows inexperienced and inarticulate participants to do sophisticated social analysis (Cloutier, 2002). Through this medium, youth can explore their own social reality, draw their own conclusions, and work toward appropriate responses. An Aboriginal Youth worker and former student explains.

> *There was a play we did....because the ratio of Aboriginal youth in the drama group was well over the population of non-Aboriginal youth at the time. So we switched the roles in the play where there is a White student that went to a Native school on a reserve or something and they were the ones that were being treated badly (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Issues explored through drama, include racism, violence, and prostitution. These themes are explored by youth through an examination of their own experiences. How effective has this been as a healing approach that does not simply "look through the lens of the colonizer and his systems of critique" (Duran & Duran, 2000, p. 98)? Does this approach offer ways to break the "hegemonic process experienced by the colonized" (p. 98)? Freire (1996) identifies this process as conscientization, whereby participants engage in action to transform their situation. Cloutier (1997) identified this conscientization process as the actions engaged in by these youth to explore issues leading to their own healing as well as the process leading to the creation of this school. The young woman quoted above continues her reflection on how her involvement in the play caused her to think about an issue from a different perspective when she played the part of a White girl.

> *We were actually in the play and working on the scene and I thought about my opinion on it and I had to because of the play and there was a girl that was vocal*

in the play and she was the one who was saying the things about White people. You took our land, took our this and that and I had no idea how to react to that because that's purely on defense mechanisms. (ICHS Youth Worker)

Yes, I too have a tendency to become defensive when I feel threatened, but what issues are being raised that could lead to further discussion? For example, would people living on Reserves approach these issues differently from those living in cities? What insights is this youth worker revealing to us? One thing that comes to mind for me is the insistence of both students and youth workers in this study, that we all need to live and work together. They believe we need to understand each other through cross-cultural awareness.

I think that's where the problem is... It's fear of the unknown. You don't know something, something you've never seen before so automatically your first reaction is to hate it, not like it. (ICHS Youth Worker)

The point being made here is that we need to *be* together in order to learn to *live* together. An interesting thought when I consider the experiences of non-acceptance these youth had in public school settings. Why do they still want to be together? In what ways can we learn from their positive outlook on life? Their beliefs that we just have to learn more about each other? That would certainly have to include historical understandings and an examination of privilege, which is not inconsistent with what youth are saying.

So that everybody's kind of learning something about other people and also about themselves... the ways that you're similar and some of the ways that you're different and sometimes differences are good things too. (ICHS Student)

A popular theater approach leads to better understandings of one another by giving youth voice and allowing them to develop awareness through adopting the role of someone else.

Financial Considerations

I end this chapter with a short discussion about financial considerations in a school such as ICHS. While this discussion does not fit clearly with the programming focus of the rest of the chapter, financial concerns consume much time and attention and often of necessity, override programming needs. Lack of adequate funding sometimes hinders the ability of school staff to pursue what they feel are best approaches and is a daily reality of alternative educational programs in Edmonton's inner city.

Supports.

As well as funding required for maintaining school programming and small class sizes, there is recognition of the need for material supports for students.

> *In terms of supports... one of the supports is bus tickets. Because many youth who come just don't have bus tickets, or don't have transportation or enough money for transportation and they can't come to school. And of course the other thing is the lunches and breakfast as well. And we've also done winter coats... damage deposits. (ICHS Teacher)*

Students identify the importance of these supports as well.

> *There's a lot of people that can come here that may not be able to eat anything at lunch and if it was like a regular high school they wouldn't get nothing because*

you have to pay the money in the cafeteria, right? And here they get it for free so it's a good thing and it's always quite healthy (ICHS Student)

I remember [student's name], they used to let him take a shower because he didn't have a shower. He used to come here and shower in the morning, get coffee and bagels..." (ICHS Student)

Alberta Learning covers less than half the costs to operate the school. An umbrella organization called Inner City Youth Development Association (ICYDA), formerly the Inner City Drama Association, oversees Inner City High School and Inner City Youth Support Programs. The goals of ICYDA include providing programming for disenfranchised urban youth to foster a sense of independence and empowerment. As a non-profit organization ICYDA can apply for funding from community sources to meet needs including school related expenses. The money for these programs that has to come from the community is significant, and poses a constant challenge. "As the number of students increases the need for programs and staffing makes the problem larger" (ICHS Teacher). In recent years, the school has attained private school status in its ongoing efforts to retain flexibility in programming through autonomy while meeting its financial needs. This status has led them to a key source of funding by accessing provincial funds for students with special needs.

Special needs.

Many youth at this school are coded with mild to moderate emotional or behavioral disabilities due to maladaptive behaviors that interfere with learning. While the practice of coding provides significant funding that arguably helps students learn in

the classroom, "it is clearly double-edged" (Wishart Leard, Taylor, & Shultz, 2006). Senior teachers and youth workers argue this funding allows them to continue operating and even provides some breathing room. Without it, where would these youth be? Back on the streets? But what do we do with the problems created by having to code – the clash in teaching models it creates? One student stands out in my mind when I think about this issue. He was a new student to the school. He had been in my Literacy class for a few days prior to this journal entry.

> [Youth Workers name] did intake with [student's name] – assessed his literacy skills as very low (early elementary) and also noted [student's] depression. (February 8, 2005)

In light of this information, I added a drawing assignment as an option for the next day's class hoping to engage this student.

> Gave the Literacy group a drawing assignment. I wrote words up on the board (such as love, anger, redemption) [words taken from the Tupac video] and asked them to draw whatever came to mind about the word(s) they chose. [Student's name] didn't draw much but made some interesting remarks about the words "redemption" and "adversity" – seems to have a pretty good understanding of words – will have to think more about this and how to highlight this strength. (February 9, 2005)

A couple things come to mind for me. First, how does a youth with literacy skills labeled as "early elementary" develop such a good understanding of words? Clearly they are words he is interested in. Where did he encounter them? Through music? Poetry? How did he come to understand their meaning? Through the context in which they were used? Or did he look them up? In what ways might the intake "tool" used to assess literacy skills, be limiting for youth who have learned survival on the streets? What other "literacies" might these youth possess that could be meaningfully measured?

As a teacher, I too am a part of that intake process. My role is to observe students behavior and, using a checklist, record behaviors that are inappropriate or hinder learning in the classroom. For example, offensive language, open defiance, argues with others, are all included on the form. Each class I am to indicate the number of times each incident occurs. The form says, "please report every incident, however minor." Do you know how many times some of these youth swear in an hour? I do, because I have to count them! These numbers support reasons for referral and are what determines whether or not special needs funding is granted. So, we need to highlight the deviant in order to receive funding. But what about the positive? How do we get to *strengths* such as the above noted student's understanding of words if we have to spend the entire class counting the number of times he swears?

Senior teachers and youth workers reject the pathological picture of students as painted by these coding requirements and they want new teachers to share their understandings. However, they find themselves engaged in coding and developing Individual Program Plans (IPPs), which then contributes to the objectification of youth, as a youth worker indicates:

> *[The] problem with the IPPs [is] where a lot of suggestions being made [by new teachers] are contrary to the way things are done here. So we're constantly struggling with this language, well it's more than a language problem....I tend to see the language of these suggestions as sort of referring to the student as almost an 'it'. And I think that we've tried hard to treat them as an 'I', somebody who's to be valued. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

But wait a minute. Aren't the coding requirements *making* teachers see students as "its"? How do you value what someone is saying while simultaneously noting the number of times they swear? Senior teachers and youth workers are caught in the contradictions that are inherent in a coding process that constructs students as deviant. Students are constructed in terms of their special needs through a process of diagnosis that makes it difficult to then re-construct them as active subjects.

So how do we reconcile the need for funding with the need to understand youth? As one teacher noted,

They're intelligent people who as youth survived by their wit. (ICHS Teacher)

Those survival skills are now being coded as pathological. A senior teacher expresses this understanding of urban youth.

In this inner city environment getting 90s in high school doesn't bring you a lot of status. Being tough does though, having drugs in your pocket does, being able to steal a car if you want to, those kind of things bring you status... But it's also getting away with things, whatever it is. Manipulating and moving around. They're the things that bring success in this environment. But when you get to school you can't use those skills at all. (ICHS Teacher)

The requirements of coding certainly indicate agreement with the unacceptability of these skills in schools. But this teacher reflects a different understanding.

Everything has changed [when you get to school] and you've got to start over, so then you're faced with becoming very humble and doing what you need to do to learn and forgetting everything else that you've had to do to succeed. And also the friends that you've developed and habits that you have and that's quite a

challenge... it doesn't happen in two weeks for sure... there's a whole new value system that has to come into play. (ICHS Teacher)

Given this understanding of youth, the zero tolerance approach underlying the rationale of the coding process seems a bit harsh. It also seems to feed the beliefs teachers come to ICHS with.

Teachers don't know how to respond to the students and they respond in ways often that are not helpful... I mean teachers are trained to be in charge. (ICHS Teacher)

So how do we move to a point of new understanding? Can the two approaches inform one another? Certainly I fed information received from an intake referral into my classroom practice, so it can't be *all* bad. How might what we as teachers *know* about youth inform the coding process. Certainly these understanding can inform a student's IPP. How else might we reconcile this problem? How might we teach this as a conflict?

While we try to protect students from the realities of coding they know it is being done. The tension is already there so it is possible that it "will probably only get worse if conflicts are not engaged" (Schramm, 2000, p. 71). If we are to accept that "any pedagogical approach must be born and reborn out of our relation to each individual classroom of students we teach" (p. 80) then perhaps coding needs to be considered as a necessary part of practice and somehow worked into a critical pedagogy. What if we talked *with* students about the ways they are constructed through coding? Could this lead to critical awareness of the street skills needed for survival and school skills needed for academic success? Might such discussions help them understand and work through these transitions?

Summary

In this chapter I have engaged dialogically with questions about the uniqueness and complexities of educational practice at ICHS. Questions of accommodations for learning come to be understood as creating the conditions that are necessary for a critical pedagogy. Before teachers can engage in critical dialogue with students they, along with youth workers, must attend to more immediate needs of students. The school's program is designed to be flexible in order to meet these student needs while also meeting the needs of the Alberta curriculum. Early service teachers struggle to find a balance between being flexible enough while conforming to the requirements of government structures that define such aspects of schooling as student finance requirements. This balance is in constant flux. Learning to live with this uncertainty as a teacher is complicated by the need to also examine one's own values about classroom practice and the choices being made about curricular content taught.

These considerations for teaching are made within an understanding of the ways in which poverty, and associated adverse living conditions and early socialization of students, has created psychological pressures for these youth. Life experiences have been woven with difficulties in schools and with social service and justice system involvement. Additional layers of understanding need to be incorporated. Culture, "race," gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location all inform these youth and as such must inform considerations for teaching.

Building on early relations and the uncertainties associated with roles in this context is the identified need to reshape youths' values to be more conducive to academic

success in schools. This too creates a struggle. Initially at least, there is a need to build confidence which seems to rely on valuing the student's street knowledge. But the attitudes and behaviors needed for school success are in direct contrast to the knowledge valued on the street. Then there is the tension apparent in discussions of broader public schooling in relation to questions of inclusion. Whose knowledge is being taught and valued in schools? Again, a more complex tapestry of understanding is needed. I have clarified the importance of interrogating the systemic reasons for youths' behaviors in teachers' relations with disenfranchised urban youth and the need to recast these relations through an examination of our own values.

Critical practices are taken up in a variety of ways at ICHS. Much of my engagement with the ideas of critical pedagogy in this context comes from my own teaching at this school and simultaneous involvement in graduate studies. Learning to construct a critical practice requires attentive reflection and a stumbling through blunders that is less than comfortable. It is also in contrast to the ways in which we are taught to manage a classroom. Becoming comfortable with this process is an ongoing challenge and is a necessary component of a relationship of mutual trust. Staff members at ICHS demonstrate strong understandings of the importance of building respectful relationships with students. Youth reflect an awareness of the ways in which they feel that teachers and youth workers value and care about them.

Critical questioning is practiced at ICHS through the arts and literacy program. Writing, reading, video, digital media, and photography provide a frame for viewing the community and experiences of youth within it. These practices offer opportunities for opening up conversations and create teachable moments within relevant themes. Through

reflection these topics also encourage us as educators to examine our own assumptions about the inner city of our community. ICHS itself grew out of a popular theater process whereby disenfranchised urban youth began to explore their own social realities, formulate understandings, and work toward solving their personal problems. This practice continues to be an important component of the school. Youth in the school point to the ways in which important insights can be developed through the popular theater process. These youth advocate the importance of integrated schooling programs as a necessary component of learning to live together. These programs would require a critical analysis of historical relations and privilege.

Funding requirements of a school that addresses the needs of disenfranchised, early school leavers are substantial and require a great deal of time and energy to access. At times these funding concerns impede the abilities of staff to pursue pedagogical practices that are in keeping with student needs. However, financial considerations are a daily reality of alternative educational programs that operate in the inner city and outside the public system. At present, the school receives substantial funding to support special needs students in the school. While this funding arguably ensures their continued existence, it creates difficulties as well. The process of coding required in order to access these funds depends on a vision of the youth's behaviors as pathological. The resulting objectification of youth prevents, particularly new teachers, from seeing these students as active subjects, a necessity if one is to engage in critical dialogue. The tensions highlighted in this chapter, of the ways subjectivities are informed in schools, and of pedagogy required versus pedagogy envisioned are the topics of subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4: Comfort that Eludes
(Programs for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth)

> Hermeneutical experience is concerned with *tradition*. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is a *language* – i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou. A Thou is not an object; it relates itself to us (Gadamer, 1989, p. 358).

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the question of whether a school designed primarily to serve the needs of disenfranchised youth generally can also meet the needs of Aboriginal students who make up the majority of its population. Not having a voice in public schools or seeing themselves reflected in curriculum and pedagogical practices often leads to Aboriginal youth leaving these school settings for separate programs built on common values and beliefs that do allow voice and opportunity. This discussion is therefore particularly relevant for and focused on the Aboriginal youth who participated in my doctoral research.

Literature on the topic of segregated programs for specific groups of learners reaches broadly to include Black youth (cf. Dei, 1996), Aboriginal learners (cf. Buckley, 1992), and religious groups (cf. Peters, 2000). Taylor (2001) in her discussion of the dynamics surrounding school choice in Alberta notes that alternative schools have been seen as a way of "protecting minority rights by 'honoring' religious and ethnic differences" (p. 24). The argument in support of segregated school programs can be generalized in the context of a Canadian pluralistic society that supports the development of values and beliefs congruent with the traditions and cultures of its people. It could be

further argued that, "a single, uniform, secular public education system may be unable to foster the diversity and variety" (Peters, 2000, p. 5) of our population.

Urban schools, developed with considerable Aboriginal control and focused on cultural survival, have emerged across Canada. Examples have included Wandering Spirit School in Toronto, Plains Indian Survival School in Calgary, and Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon (Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997). Joe Duquette High School attributed its success to a commitment to focus on Aboriginal spirituality and relationships within the school. A healing focus was directly related to spiritual practices. While acknowledging the validity of the arguments in favor of schools specifically designed for Aboriginal students, my research at ICHS offers an alternative understanding of the ways in which disenfranchised youth may wish to be, and arguably can be, successfully included in public school programs. I begin this discussion with reflection on the reversal of consciousness that clarified my beliefs about inclusion of disenfranchised Aboriginal youth. I then engage with the tensions that emerge in discussions with youth regarding their experiences of segregation and experiences of integration. These tensions lead me to questions about comfort. The youth in this study did not find comfort in any of their earlier experiences in schools. I explore the possibilities of why this might be.

Reversal of Consciousness

Over the past years as a graduate student I have consciously endeavored to *know* an Aboriginal experience of education in order to understand how best to educate students in my classroom. I looked for common observations in relation to schooling to

emerge as a universal, for what Aristotle would have described as contributing to the formation of a concept (Gadamer, 1989, p. 353). I have read literature, taken courses on issues in Aboriginal education and engaged in many conversations on various related topics. Certainly there is no shortage of opinions on ways education should and should not unfold for Aboriginal students. But all of those opinions become difficult to reconcile when we take tradition to mean "the opinion of another person" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 358). So how might I understand *meaning* as detached from the individuals I have conversed with? How might these relations *teach* me something?

My own perceptions of behavior as "typical and regular" conform to an initial understanding of experiences with Aboriginal people which, "flattens out the nature of hermeneutical experience" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 359). As Kant said, the other should never be used as a means but always as an end in himself [sic] (p. 358). How might each experience have spoken to me? My relations with Aboriginal scholars arise out of historical relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. It always seemed to me that these relations were playing themselves out in university classes, and conversations in the hallway. I entered into these relations with certain expectations. In particular, I expected to be treated badly because I am White. After all, haven't White people treated Aboriginal people badly in the past (and *still* some would argue)? Shouldn't I *expect* resentment for those past wrongs? But in what ways did my recognition of what was typical in behaviors shape my interpretations? It seems I was looking for generalities, a means to confirm earlier experiences. I was looking for what was predictable.

The experience of the Thou, in relation *to* us, is a moral phenomenon. I tried to understand how the past has shaped the present and be understanding of anger even when directed at me. I understand the Thou as another person. I tried to understand the other's point of view. But in this way the "Thou loses the immediacy with which it makes its claim" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 359). I have "co-opted and pre-empted reflectively from the standpoint of the other person" (p. 359). The inner historicity of these relations points to a constant struggle for mutual recognition. This results in *tension* and possibly domination of one person by the other. My attempts at genuine understanding certainly had the potential to be essentializing as I looked for regularities in behavior to inform my teaching and writing. "The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance" (p. 360). Many of our approaches to policy and practice for youth who are disenfranchised make this claim to understanding. Funding for special needs students and the requirements of coding are one example. The tensions created by the need to pursue funding in this way versus the hermeneutical understandings possible through emancipatory teaching will be explored in chapters six and seven.

I reflect on how I came to an awareness of the limitations of my experience. What was the reversal of consciousness? Insight "involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive" (p. 356). What have I learned about myself? I continued to pursue relations with Aboriginal scholars and others, people I had connected with through shared values regarding schooling and goals related to inclusion of those who have been disenfranchised. One colleague was initially excited about engaging in a project with me at ICHS but then decided the school didn't have what she was looking

for, primarily, a program with a foundation of Aboriginal culture and taught by Aboriginal teachers. But I had come to believe that the program at ICHS was working well for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal students and wanted to talk about its possibilities. An ICHS teacher reflects on how their program seems to promote positive self-images for young people.

> *Question: I think there is a [societal] change in the way Aboriginal youth feel about themselves.*
>
> *Teacher: It's fostered here... I think that people with Native background feel better about it here than they would maybe somewhere else [public schools].*
>
> *Question: Any thoughts on how it is fostered here?*
>
> *Teacher: General acceptance of who you are.*

Although I acknowledge the potential value of programs designed specifically around Aboriginal culture, such as Amiskwaciy (an Edmonton Public school for Aboriginal students), other alternatives may have something to offer as well. Certainly the need for programs for disenfranchised youth is great. Possibly we might discover something new to add to existing knowledge.

Literature seems to support different approaches to schooling and also supports the rejection of "positive" essentialisms. While there are good reasons to argue that there is something "essentially different about [Aboriginal] world views and lived experiences" stemming from "innate spirituality and traditional cultures" the promotion of "selective particularities risks returning to discourses and practices of enforced categorical difference" (Lee & Lutz, 2005, p. 13). The promotion of separate programs also ignores the need for "mainstream" schools to improve their responsiveness to Aboriginal students

and to foster greater understanding among non-Aboriginal students. The hermeneutical negativity in this relation, a false generalization refuted by experience, allowed an insight to emerge for me and helped me to move forward with greater confidence discerning the possibilities that emerge through experience within the bounds of this study. The tension highlighted here, of segregation versus integration in schools, is highlighted in the experiences of disenfranchised urban youth as well. Historically affected consciousness rejects the notion that "things are naturally like this" (Gadamer, p. 361). Instead, we need to let ourselves experience tradition by being "open to the truth claim encountered in it" (p. 362). "Hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man [sic] from the man captivated by dogma" (p. 362). Hermeneutical consciousness opens up possibilities for understanding not only myself but also the youth in this study. While hermeneutics is about finding ourselves it is also marked by the degree to which it demonstrates understanding of what is being studied.

Tensions of Togetherness

The tension of togetherness that informs schooling for Aboriginal youth is highlighted by the following discussion. This dialogue offers an experience of an Aboriginal youth worker at ICHS that suggests something different to me from thoughts I had held previously about the value inherent in a particular program for Aboriginal students. This youth worker, a graduate of ICHS, entered and attended the University of Alberta, and the Transition Year Program (TYP). The TYP is designed to provide access

to university programs for Aboriginal students who may not qualify for direct entry into a specific faculty.

L: When I was in the TYP program, I didn't complete for one... which was no fault but my own. Um, I felt completely uncomfortable when I was there. It almost seemed like they were promoting racism and separatism. (ICHS Student)

Question: The TYP program?

L: Yeah.

Question: So if you were in a regular Education program you probably would have been...

L: I probably would have been happier. I would have wanted to go to class.

Question: Yeah

L: I used to get picked on in class. They used to call me a red apple and stuff like that.

Question: Oh, why?

L: And these were my peers. Because I, what was it one of the girls called me... a white sympathizer. Well I'm half white.

Question: Yeah

L: I just felt completely uncomfortable and I made a few complaints and said, "Look, I don't feel comfortable writing about this particular subject," and if you don't write on that subject then you fail and you don't get marked for it.

Question: Was it a subject about Native students or Native people?

L: It was how the White man... how do you feel your life has been affected by the White man stealing your language? I didn't feel comfortable writing on that because...

Question: You have to agree that they stole your language?

L: Exactly. Well, I have to agree, but at the same point in time it wasn't mine to begin with. I wasn't raised like that. Like I'm... my mother's White.

Therein lies the tension. How do we engage with historical issues in schools without having students feel they are betraying themselves, their friends, or their family members, and without assuming a coherent unitary student identity? His comments raise questions about how we promote group cohesion and affirm individual identities while simultaneously promoting cross-cultural understandings. An ICHS student reflects on this dilemma.

People need something to identify with... they could learn something they didn't know about their heritage, but I don't think it should be focused on one culture. I think it should be a mix of things... and maybe you adapt that to your life so that it goes around and creates less racism (ICHS Student).

Haig-Brown (1995) points out that tensions are a part of life and "the discomfort inherent in this kind of work is an essential aspect of it" (p. 263). Maybe we need to work it through together in schools.

The Hermeneutical Question

Gadamer (1989) reminds us "we cannot have experiences without asking questions" (p. 362). What does the youth worker dialogue above reveal to me that was

not as I first thought? I wondered, *do* segregated educational programs, designed for specific cultural groups promote racism as I interpreted the speaker above to be saying. I wanted to believe this. Clearly, in this dialogue, I led him to continue with that thought. It fit with my beliefs that integrated programs are necessary if we are to learn to live together. What is broken open by the phrase "I felt completely uncomfortable?" Shouldn't this type of program have made him feel more comfortable? After all, as he says, "these were my peers." And for some students the TYP *does* make them feel comfortable as reflected in these comments of a participant in the program, "it's kind of a family-oriented atmosphere" (Kubish, 2005, p. 7). So why did the youth above feel uncomfortable? What might have been different for him? While issues of "race" and the fact that this youth has one Aboriginal parent and one White parent need to be explored, it seems to me that the ways in which he was shaped by his former street involvement may have been a contributing factor in his lack of comfort in the TYP.

Throughout this dissertation I explore notions of socioeconomic class differences in relation to this question and others. I also wonder how my notion of a *regular* education program might have contributed to this lack of comfort through examination of my earlier held beliefs. Why might some students feel their involvement in segregated programs, designed to validate identities and provide safe comfort zones, leave them feeling confused and uncomfortable? Other students respond well to these segregated settings. What might happen for disenfranchised students if we interrogated the notion of "regular" and deconstructed terms such as "red apple"?

Consciousness Raising Education

Battiste (2000) tells us "little classroom research has been done on the effects of teaching students about their culture, history, and languages, as well as about oppression, racism, and differences in worldviews" (p. 206). However, she goes on to say that consciousness raising courses at all levels of formal education "have brought to the surface new hopes and dreams and have raised the aspirations and educational successes of Aboriginal students" (p. 206). With "little classroom research" to back up this statement it is unclear what she means by educational successes. Does she mean the acquisition of formal credentials? If so, we don't know for certain that consciousness raising courses have been directly responsible for these successes. It would seem difficult to dispute the idea of new hopes and dreams deriving from "coming to understand that poverty and oppression are not their fault and are not the result of their faulty language, consciousness, or culture" (p. 206).

But if consciousness also includes understanding "that poverty and oppression are tools created by modern society to maintain the status quo and to foster and legitimize racism and class divisions" (Battiste, 2000, p. 206) could this not lead some students to feel uncomfortable with how they are positioned within the discourse as is the case outlined in the above dialogue? And if so, is it just "mixed race" students who might feel uncomfortable or could this apply to other Aboriginal students as well? In what ways might educators work with this discomfort as a starting point for dialogue and understandings of who it is that can best work with these places of discomfort in schools? In mainstream schools, those positioned to create dialogue hold power and privilege over those who are disenfranchised. Clearly individual teachers and students are positioned differently within the discourse creating inherent difficulties for this dialogue to occur.

As educators we need to reflect on how to "allow space for Aboriginal consciousness, language, and identity to flourish" without creating essentializing visions of "what most non-Aboriginal people think" (p. 197)? And without creating essentializing visions of what most Aboriginal people think. It is within these spaces that we need to consider what is comfortable for the very students we hope to encourage to reach their hopes and dreams and interrogate questions of who holds power in these places.

The dialogue above was followed up in another discussion with this same youth worker and another Aboriginal youth worker at the school who is also a former student.

V: I was just thinking that... I think it was maybe you (L) said that it might promote racism going into an Aboriginal based course or something like that, just because they're Aboriginal.

Question: Mmmhmm

V: I could see that point of view because I mean in the real world we don't have that, the work place [isn't] set up for just you know, (L) just works for Native people

L: Yeah

Are they saying they would be more comfortable in integrated programs? I don't imagine so based on their prior experiences in public schools. And, in terms of university classes, I don't imagine the youth quoted above would have been comfortable in a mixed program either. He could have avoided discussing painful topics but he may still have felt like a fish out of water - both Aboriginal and poor in an environment that is largely White and middle class. As one senior teacher explains,

There's a whole different syntax involved in the way of presenting yourself. And not only that, it's the stepping out of your environment, which is about as uncomfortable for a young person as it would be for you [the researcher] to start living in the inner city environment on a daily basis. Your language would be as out of place in the inner city as theirs is when they come into the [middle] class environment at the university. (ICHS Teacher)

Staff members at ICHS are saying that youth need to develop dominant middle class ways to survive in mainstream society. An important consideration when preparing youth to enter post secondary studies but I think these youth are saying they *should* be comfortable in integrated public school settings. They should be accepted for who they are. They are expressing an ideal, a world that doesn't (yet) exist. The whole point of many segregated programs is that these students *don't* feel comfortable in integrated settings. In order for segregated programs for Aboriginal students to exist, concrete opposition is "essential and necessary" (Haig-Brown, 1995, p. 264). That is, "without the majority society and its impact on First Nations people, there would be no need for or even possibility of such a place" (p. 264). The tension reflects the opposing nature of these two types of institutions. Yet at the same time, they are interconnected. How do we engage with this tension? Or, how do we recognize the inherent *value* in the tension, that "struggle is central to development" (p. 283)? And so it seems to me that it is these struggles that we need to engage with in schools – both segregated and integrated settings.

How might terms such as "red apple" and "White sympathizer" provide a forum for this type of dialogue? The image of a red apple seems to epitomize the very tension

revealed here, "the prospect of living with the contradiction of two worlds, which is at the same time one world" (Haig-Brown, 1995, p. 268). The ways in which we reconcile the contradictions in our lives are influenced and regulated by societal norms. Terms such as red apple are used to convey displeasure with the ways in which these tensions are engaged.

Maybe it is the need to engage with the issues that the youth workers are getting at with the following dialogue. But not just to engage in these issues with other Aboriginal people. Rather, it seems to be important that we engage with *all* parties implicated in these issues. That is, all of us.

V: It would be the same if we kept our kids at home and taught them at home schooling.

Question: Yeah

V: Then they don't get that social aspect and then they don't know how to interact with other kids.

Question: Yeah

V: And it's the same if it were to be just Aboriginal and White.

L: A child needs to develop those social skills at an early age or else you know they'll be sitting up on a bell tower when they're older and...

Question: Yeah... okay. So then does the same hold true of a program like [school for Aboriginal youth]?

L: From the youth who have gone through our program who have gone through [school for Aboriginal youth] I've heard nothing but bad things... From everyone

that I've spoken with, they've said the same thing that, it was almost, there was too much racism. It was all about white bashing.

These struggles need to be engaged with in schools. These two youth workers weren't comfortable with experiences they viewed as essentializing practices in programs designed to develop Aboriginal consciousness. Why did they end up feeling this way? What led them to a conclusion of racism from a program designed to develop an awareness of systems of oppression under which they themselves have suffered? Certainly other Aboriginal students find these programs affirm their identities through validation of cultural values and a greater sense of belonging. Students from Joe Duquette High School who were interviewed all mentioned the importance of cultural and spiritual aspects of the program as being important (Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997). These two youth workers, however, didn't experience that same sense of belonging in these programs. Yet they experienced racism and exclusion in public school settings as well. While these youth are saying that we need to be together (with Non-Aboriginal students) to engage in those struggles, certainly others believe they can be engaged more effectively from within the parameters of a segregated program. In an ethnographic study investigating developing First Nations control in the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, Haig-Brown (1995) notes "co-existence may be fraught with tension but there are benefits of articulating the conflict and its underlying values" (p. 269). Certainly the possibility of engaging with struggles exists in both segregated and integrated programs.

The youth workers' experiences of disenfranchisement may have led them to express sentiments about multiculturalism as noted in the following dialogue, yet what they are saying suggests we need to engage further in discussions of these issues.

L: I don't want to put my own foot in my mouth here but people are still fuming over what happened a hundred, two hundred years ago.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: And by putting programs, separate programs for individual cultures and groups, that's just adding fuel to the fire. That's just feeding it.

Question: Feeds it?

L: And Canada's supposed to be about multiculturalism.

Question: Yeah

L: You know and that's how I was raised and that's what I believe is that we should all be together.

Question: Yeah. Well, the argument is that maybe those things happened a hundred years ago but the racism continues today. So... if you felt you were abused growing up because of your skin color or whatever?

L: I was. It happened to me. You know, I suffered racism several times.

V: Even I did. I mean I don't look Native at all... but my family does, my mom definitely does.

Question: Mmmhmm

V: And when we lived in (name of city)... it's a city but it's very small... and our family was one of you know the 5% in the whole city that was Native and it was obvious and ah I never felt so much of it. I guess my sister and brother did a bit.

Question: Mmmhmm, (do) they look more Native, your sister and brother?

V: Yeah

L: Especially her brother.

Question: The community I grew up in, (name of town) a little town in rural Manitoba, the Native kids had a really, really difficult time. There's two things... they're also poor...

V: Exactly

Question: And so, you know the middle class people don't talk to the poor people and the White people don't talk to the Native people. So if you're Native and poor, forget it.

L: Yes sir.

Question: You're down there living by the river and nobody's talking to you ever.

V: Yeah, we were on welfare too. My mom was alone.

Question: Yeah, so that adds to the whole and it's hard to separate what's causing what...

But simply putting everyone together certainly isn't going to get at the issues that are being raised in this dialogue. Contrary to the above comment that "Canada is supposed to be about multiculturalism" Aboriginal people have special status in Canada, distinct from official multiculturalism as Battiste and Henderson (2000) point out.

> Within the context of the Constitution of Canada, Indigenous knowledge and heritage is an existing Aboriginal right. The "promise" of protecting Aboriginal rights, as it was termed by the Supreme Court in *R. v. Sparrow* (1990, 1083), recognized not only the ancient occupation of land by Aboriginal peoples, but their contribution to the building of Canada and the special commitments made to them by successive governments (p. 212).

My interpretation of these youth worker's comments is that a focus on multiculturalism may reflect a lack of awareness or may also indicate that these youth would be more comfortable without special status. Being like everybody else attracts less attention, something to hide behind. So maybe it's a way to avoid talking about issues that are uncomfortable, to avoid facing our demons. Clearly we're all implicated in these issues. These youth workers have suggested being separated into racial groups may feed these issues, leading to questions for me of whether integrated programs could work at interrogating the issues through critical dialogue. How might segregated programs achieve the same ends? Either way, I believe we need to face these issues in schools even though the process of doing so is often not comfortable. It appears that comfort eludes these students in both segregated and integrated settings. Working through issues together, with a consideration of who holds power in the discussions, may lead all of us to a place of greater comfort when we come to understand our shared history and lived experiences. For me the question isn't so much about segregated versus integrated schools but rather it is an issue about comfort for disenfranchised youth. It's about creating spaces where youth can have a voice, be validated in their personal lives and experiences, and find comfort through acceptance. And, maybe it's about approaches that interrogate the issues in ways that allow people to respect themselves *and* others.

Feeling Uncomfortable in Schools

Where might these students, both former and current, feel a sense of belonging? Is belonging a physical place or a social space? Why have they felt uncomfortable? Historically, since the arrival of western forms of education, schooling has been wrought

with difficulties for Aboriginal families. In Canada, we have a long history of assimilationist models of education for Aboriginal children. As Graveline (1998) reminds us "colonial forms of education, particularly residential schools, have contributed greatly to the efforts to eradicate Traditional forms of Aboriginal consciousness" (p. 27). Well-documented accounts of residential school experiences clearly point to environments where Aboriginal students did not feel comfortable. These schools were based on the belief "that separation of children from their family and communities would best serve the longer-term interests of assimilation into the colonizer's 'superior' culture" (p. 28). Verbal and physical abuse was a regular occurrence and is obviously beyond discomfort, but even now, with these blatant forms of mistreatment gone, clearly the underlying problems live on. Disenfranchised urban Aboriginal students still struggle for a "fit" in schools. A place to belong, to feel comfortable.

And what of those students who are also poor? Those whose mothers are raising them alone, without support, on welfare? How about youth who don't have a home, who are fending for themselves on the streets of inner city Edmonton? Do any of these intersections increase the level of discomfort, of not belonging in schools? Statistics tell us that Aboriginal youth are disproportionately represented within the population of urban, single parents living in poverty. Canada's Aboriginal population has a high proportion of children and youth (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1998). In Alberta approximately half of Aboriginal people live in urban centers (First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, 2002). A lower proportion of urban Aboriginal youth live with their parents compared to all urban youth and a higher proportion live with a partner or as a single parent. Certainly another study would be

needed to consider *degrees* of discomfort and belonging in schools but in what directions might such a study go? Considering the relation of gender, we can see from the above dialogue that the woman speaking feels her brother and sister experienced more racism than she did because they looked "more Native," not necessarily because of gender. But what of single mothers raising children in poverty? Certainly that is a gender issue.

What is broken open by the phrase "I don't look Native at all?" What is she saying here? How do I come to understand her meaning? When she spoke those words I had a particular understanding of her meaning based on my previous experiences. I expected her to have been treated badly in her community based on what I knew of her family circumstances and the historical conditions of urban Aboriginal people living in Canada. It fit with what I *knew* to be the experiences of Aboriginal people in my own community. My community was racist. It ignored poor people. None of us talked to poor, Aboriginal people, not even in our own classrooms. I had one Aboriginal friend as a child and she had been adopted into a White family. They weren't wealthy, but they weren't poor either. They went to our church. My family approved of them. I often think of my former Aboriginal classmates, many of whom are now dead. I know we contributed to their deaths, by ignoring them. I know that the community contributed to those deaths by not giving their parents jobs. Power in the community and school, was held by those who were White and middle class. I know those students didn't finish school because they couldn't stand to be there. They weren't comfortable in that school in Manitoba in the 1960s and 1970s just as they aren't comfortable in schools here and now.

I've just discovered through the process of writing this section that *I'm* not comfortable knowing all this. I want young people to be comfortable in schools.

Achieving comfort though means achieving respect and acceptance. An emancipatory goal of schooling challenges existing relations and complacent acceptance of the status quo. It works through discomfort to a place of positive change. It means upsetting the balance, a place where we all may feel discomfort but ultimately reaches toward a goal of more positive relations in schools.

So what else have I learned from my dialogue with the youth workers? Does "looking Native" imply that a person might not want to? It seems that a person would experience less racism that way. Haig-Brown (1995) identifies residential schools as prime sites for developing cultural self-hatred. That fits with my earlier beliefs too, based on comments such as this made by the youth worker (L) above: "growing up as a kid myself, I never used to tell people I was Native. I used to tell people I was Italian." And why not, if it minimizes the abuse somewhat. Mahtani (2005) tells us the multiracial experiences of the "mixed race" person "has traditionally been marked by a relentless negativity (p. 77) compounded by gender and social class stereotypes. More recent notions of race that celebrate hybridity tend not to problematize shifting power relations. Mahtani found that the "mixed race" women of her study refused to read their "mixed race" status as a problem but instead chose to occupy spaces "at both the centre and the margins" (p. 90). The youth worker above is doing something different though. He has one Aboriginal parent and one White parent. No Italian ancestry anywhere. So instead of moving between and across categories in a comfortable fashion, he was looking to pass himself off as something different from what he actually is. He wasn't comfortable with himself. Or more accurately, he has been made to feel uncomfortable in schools and the community by those who have projected non-acceptance on him. Others report a similar

experience. A First Nations instructor at the Native Education Centre in Vancouver said, "I was so ashamed to be Indian… if my friends ever tried to talk about Indians, I'd just change the subject" (p. 281).

And certainly I didn't *expect* him or others to be comfortable. Would I be comfortable if I were Aboriginal? I guess it would depend on what influences intersected in my life. I have certainly met Aboriginal people in recent years who *are* comfortable being Aboriginal and caused me to rethink earlier expectations I had held. They are people who demonstrate pride in a rich cultural tradition and who engage in both traditional and contemporary cultural practices. They are also people who either felt accepted in their early school years or who have come to find acceptance in more recent experiences. They show, like the youth worker above came to believe, "our culture is beautiful." It seems to me that it didn't matter so much if the program was segregated or integrated. What mattered was a sense of community. And like the First Nations instructor in Vancouver who was transformed by an introduction to her culture from self-hatred to "growing appreciation of the beauty of her family and First Nations people generally" (p. 281). So again, historically affected consciousness has led me to reject the notion that things are naturally a certain way. I have come to understand that experiences I had growing up were not reflective of all experiences. So why are some Aboriginal people more comfortable than others? The intersection of poverty in particular seems to be significant. Not just poverty, however, rather the poverty that results from particular historical relations in Canada that devalued Aboriginal culture. Location is a factor as well. Inner cities are more fragmented and less conducive to finding and sharing common cultural values. There are problems of pervasive poverty on many Reserves in Canada as

well yet Edmonton's inner city offers its own uniqueness. We need to consider how families and communities have been fragmented, how many youth are floating without these anchors. We need to consider the variety of experiences present in our schools and focus on these current relations in historical context as a platform for critical practice.

And what of me? I've wondered if I would be comfortable in the shoes of the Aboriginal Youth Worker I conversed with and worked with. He's already indicated his transformation to a belief that Aboriginal cultures are beautiful. Here's what he said about social class.

> *L: I know several people who mock me because I live in this area and they say, "Oh, every time I drive through I roll up my windows and lock the doors." Why? What for? Because you know there's a guy drinking on the bench? You know there's more crime happens out in (name of city) and (name of community in Edmonton) than actually happens down here.*
>
> *Question: Mmmhmm*
>
> *L: At least down here I wouldn't have to worry about shootings.*
>
> *Question: Right.*
>
> *L: I have to worry about people asking me for spare change or cigarettes. You know that's the harshest thing that I've experienced around here.*

Clearly he's comfortable with his inner city neighborhood as well. In contrast, my neighbourhood is predominantly middle class and predominantly White. He mentions crime and the perception that there is more of it in the inner city. I believed that at first, too. It was uncomfortable wandering around the inner city. In part, I didn't belong and it appeared to me that people I met on the street shared that opinion. Was it me or was it

them? If I *looked* uncomfortable then it would appear that I didn't belong. And maybe he's saying there are more similarities amongst neighborhoods than differences between. Do socioeconomic differences need to be such a barrier? Easy for me to say, I have more than I need. But I think he's making an important point about perceptions. And maybe we all need to feel comfortable somewhere, but not necessarily in the same place. The notion that my neighborhood is one to aspire to is a bit ethnocentric. But it isn't ethnocentric to assume people might aspire to a safe place, both physically and psychologically, where basic needs are met. Herein lies another tension that begs engagement in schools.

Becoming Comfortable in Schools

So how do we disrupt the current social order and move to a place where all students can feel more comfortable in *schools*? Where *regular* means all students and all schools. A place where all young people experience a sense of belonging? A critical pedagogy offers such possibilities, a space to begin to move toward a goal of respect and acceptance through engagement of all students' life experiences, not just those who currently occupy the mainstream. Thinking about the word "comfortable" led me to the dictionary. The word comfort means, "wellbeing; ease; consolation; means of consolation or satisfaction" (Collins, 1991). The thesaurus offers "peaceful" as a synonym. Similarly, the word "uncomfortable" offers alternatives such as "self-consciousness" and "embarrassment." How do we move from embarrassment to peaceful? The word embarrassment takes me back to my discussion with the Youth Worker (L) above. In reference to youth at ICHS he said, "they come to believe the stereotype then it gets to the point where they, some of them have felt it's embarrassing to be Native." This Youth

Worker though has made this transition from embarrassment (telling others he is Italian) to peaceful (our culture is beautiful). So what can be learned from an examination of his experiences?

I followed up this issue in discussion with the two former students discussed above. They spoke of both traditional and contemporary cultural practices and about providing youth with information and resources that they could *choose* to access when and if they are ready.

> *Question: I wonder if it is something you come to as you get older... if maybe you start wanting to know more about it [one's family and cultural traditions].*
>
> *L: When I was younger I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed to be Native and I didn't care, I didn't want to know anything about my culture, I was actually embarrassed because I knew how to smudge during a Sweetgrass Ceremony.*
>
> *Question: Mmmhmm*
>
> *L: Like I was, that was embarrassing to me because none of, all my friends would look at me like, "Oh, good God, man what are you, how do you know how to do that," and I was embarrassed of it but as I got older I wanted to know more and more. I think it helped shape me and who I am.*

The discussion then moved into aspects of contemporary cultural practices.

> *V: Last year... I took part in a workshop... one of the kids from (name of school for disenfranchised urban youth)... he was very much into the hip hop culture and Native culture and he could talk about it for hours, you know if you just asked one question he'd go on and on and on... I mean he was obviously proud of it.*

Here we see two examples of young people who found pride in cultural awareness and identification. One youth was comfortable with more traditional forms of cultural practice, and the other through more contemporary modes of expression. So what led to their comfort? It seems it was not so much the *form* of expression but rather how it made them feel. Proud. Comfortable? Peaceful? Both of these youth attended schools that were not based on cultural practices but rather on particular pedagogies for populations of youth who are disenfranchised. So how did they come to pursue these paths? Maybe these Youth Workers are right, maybe in an environment where people feel respected, and where the information is available, young people might just *choose* a form of expression that reflects and validates who they feel they are. In an interview with Hood (2000) Morales, a Mayan educator said about respect,

> *It is important that we identify ourselves as Indian people. So, we shouldn't be ashamed of our languages, of our dress, of our customs – there are many things – and we shouldn't be ashamed of them. Unfortunately, the education that we got in school, they have never taught us any of these things. But respect is real and important to communication (p. 97).*

Certainly the students in this study weren't taught to respect material elements of culture in schools but they weren't taught respect in general either, as reflected in these comments by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

> *When I was in [public] high school, the teachers they're not friendly. (ICHS Student)*

I had some pretty bad experiences because all the schools I went to, if you weren't like a certain type of person then nobody liked you and you got picked on... the teachers would just turn the other cheek whatever, they just didn't care about it. (ICHS Student)

The teachers judged me on my marks and treated me by their judgments... and they'd be like, "Ok, this kid's like basically a waste of time." (ICHS Student)

I didn't like the way I was being treated, that's all. (ICHS Student)

Respect needs to be taught in schools, we need to learn *about* each other and about ourselves. But we also need to model respect as reflected in this Mayan cultural practice.

In the Maya culture, the way we should respect the Elders is obedience. Also, when a child gets up, they have to bow their heads to the Elder, and the grandfather puts his right hand on the child's head. That's the signal of protection (Morales, 2000, p. 97).

Through this practice children learn respect, but also that they are respected. Many of the youth in my study pointed to this lack of respect as contributing to their discomfort and early school leaving. As one Aboriginal student said,

They'll [ICHS Teachers] actually help out when you need it. They won't push you away like normal schools might. (ICHS Student)

They also identified the respect they felt from teachers at ICHS as important elements in their current school experiences. A non-Aboriginal student reflects a general feeling amongst the students in this study.

Teachers here don't look at you as a student, they look at you as a person and a student so they treat you like both... you can call teachers by their first names here, which is also a sign of respect too in a way. (ICHS Student)

Two Aboriginal students add:

I like the way that you could be friends with your teachers... they got more time for you. (ICHS Student)

I find it a lot easier here... there's not that much to worry about... like teachers they can joke around with you. (ICHS Student)

These students feel they have the respect of their teachers at ICHS and are comfortable in the "dynamics of the school [that] are... a perfect temperature" (ICHS Student).

Summary

In this chapter I have engaged hermeneutically with the tensions of togetherness in this inner city context. I have troubled my own understandings of Aboriginal, "mixed race," and White students in a context of disenfranchised urban youth. I have developed an awareness of my own experiences as not typical and regular in relation to this population. An understanding that emerges for me is that *comfort* as a space eludes these inner city youth and possibly eludes all of us as we struggle to find ways to learn and live together. Comfort is not taken to mean complacency or to provide a place that is soothing and calm but rather a place where we can incorporate all students' experiences in valid and meaningful ways in order that all students experience a sense of belonging. In the inner city school of this study a critical pedagogy approach brings all youth to a place of understanding social issues and a comfort in inclusion in the discussion, knowing their

voices are heard. While the process may be uncomfortable as we grapple with our demons, inclusion is inherently more comfortable than exclusion. Ultimately we come to a place of greater comfort together. While these youth may be comfortable in the inner city school of this study I continue to question whether this is comfort derived from avoidance of places where they feel uncomfortable. It seems that it is also important for these youth that their comfort not be achieved at the expense of other's comfort. That is they want to respect themselves *and* others. It seems we need to continue to trouble the notion of "regular" to move to an understanding of all programs and all students as "regular." That is, we need to embrace difference. My interpretation of the youths' comments on segregated educational programs is that we could move away from a binary understanding of separate versus together to considerations of ways to create comfortable spaces for disenfranchised urban youth in schools.

Chapter 5: Comfort that Eludes (subjectivities in schools)

> The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'... So the 'unities' which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of 'closure.' (S. Hall, 1996a, p. 5).

Introduction

The youth in this study share common public schooling experiences whereby subjectivities reflect "interlocking systems of oppression" (Jones, 2001, p. 145). This chapter explores these interlocking systems of oppression by examining the ways in which poverty, "race," and gender inform the subjectivities of disenfranchised urban youth both within the context of their public school experiences and more recently, at ICHS. I then go on to examine my own subjectivity through similar lenses. Continually changing subjectivities reveal how early schooling experiences have shaped awareness of self for both the students and myself. Jones states that "self is constructed intersubjectively" and that "fundamental conflicts centered around class, gender, and race are experienced through social interactions and are deeply inscribed in the unconscious or imaginary dimension of subjectivity" (p. 146).

Acceptance Informing Subjectivity

A student at ICHS talks about her experiences in a large urban public school and how teachers and fellow students' behaviors inform her beliefs of her place in the school.

> *L: The cheerleaders and there was the people who did like the video stuff... they have a studio with cameras, like it was crazy, it was really cool but like they have*

all that kind of stuff and those kinds of people and even in with the teachers they get treated differently than people who are not so involved with that kind of stuff.

Question: Oh, the teachers have priorities then?

L: Well, with the students they kind of do like a favoritism thing. Because I remember this, I was in the TV program so I was an anchor-person and what they do is they read the schools' announcements or whatever in the morning and at lunchtime or whatever, so I was like the anchor-person and they had TVs in all the classrooms and you'd go on the TV and you'd read the announcements.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: And I was part of that for almost the whole year and at the end of the year they did a big kind of end of the year show and showed all the work that people that were involved in that did and I wasn't in any of the pictures or anything like that. And like the people who were, had been in the program for longer or who had more of a relationship with other students or the teachers.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: They were all in there, but I wasn't.

In what ways might this girl's experience have informed her understanding of self? Clearly she doesn't identify with "those kinds of people" who "get treated differently" by teachers. Is it just because they are involved in those kinds of activities that they get treated differently or is it a certain type of student who gets involved with those activities in the first place? That is, what would a class, gender, and "race" analysis of the video club and cheer squad reveal? If it's true, as another student said "to go on the cheer team you have to have I think it's five years dance experience" and "the people in

(name of school) their cheer team are like maybe a hundred pounds" then they are looking for experienced dancers. Not street kids who haven't had the class advantages of high level training opportunities, accenting Bourdieu's (2004) assertion that "the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by possession of economic capital" (p. 25).

Do these youth hold these understandings? Do they shape the ways in which they think about themselves? The girl quoted above certainly doesn't reveal this understanding. She is quick to say her exclusion was because "I was a new student." Yet she also knew she was different from "those kinds of people." It is in such situations that people learn about differences. She understands, as this experience indicates, that she is different whether or not she frames it as a class, gender, or "race" difference she knows that "people who are not so much into the arts, they don't get as much attention as those who are." She is different in relation to them. The construction of gender and racial identity was informed for this young woman by her position at the bottom of the socioeconomic structure within her school and community. As Raissiguier (1993) reminds us " lived realities and the ways in which they [women] negotiate them are clearly mediated by different structural and discursive boundaries" (p. 154). From her social location this young woman begins to develop understandings of herself mediated by the cultural and discursive contexts she has participated in.

In our discussion of people who are not so much into the arts who don't get as much attention, she went on to say that is "not really fair because there's a lot of people have to go there [to that school] because they're in the neighborhood." Now she is starting to get at a class understanding. The neighborhood is poor, the core of the inner

city. Some youth have to go to that school because they live in the neighborhood. Others can choose to attend from other parts of the city in order to access specialized programming. She knows that it is the neighborhood youth who are being ignored. Yet she takes responsibility for that lack of acceptance. "I was interested in the arts but I'm also very shy so it was [difficult] to be part of those groups." Jones (2001) suggests that such interpretations of experience allow for saving face and in so doing, those in her study "developed a defense against oppression" (p. 154).

Identifying herself as shy prevents her from acknowledging that the neighborhood youth, of which she is one, are poor and predominantly Aboriginal or "mixed race." Yet acceptance was important and she hoped to find it.

L: I had a really hard time trying to make friends, I made a couple of acquaintances that I had lunch with... but that was about it. So I was really lonely... I thought maybe like you know in a big school like that they could have some kind of group or something of new students that have come from other places that didn't know anybody... if you've moved around a lot like I did, you don't have that close group of friends.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: So it's a little bit harder. And I found it really difficult in that huge population to make friends.

Question: Yeah

L: My whole grade 12 year was really, really difficult and I think that's part of the reason that I dropped out. Just because I didn't really have any support from people my age... really the only support I had when I went there I was seeing one

of those guidance counselors like every other day or something because I was having some difficult times at home too. But I didn't have any friends for grade twelve like, nobody. I was totally by myself so it was really like, actually really depressing.

Considering subjectivity in relation others, what does she now understand? Others have friends, others have supportive families. So what does that tell her about herself? She learned that to find a place to belong she had to become someone else.

L: There was a lot of people who were really involved in that kind of life [heavily involved in drugs] and I got pulled all over the place... because I was still so unsure about what I wanted and so unsure about myself... and I wanted to fit in.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: So if someone came and they seemed... nice and they said let's go, I would go.

Question: Yeah

L: Because I wanted to be part of something right?

As she said, "I used to be really heavy into drugs," so she learned that to find a place to belong she had to adopt those behaviors. O'Dowd (1993) tells us that drug taking can be an affirmative action indicative of taking control of a situation. These youth may then become part of a subculture, often a response to lack of access to mainstream society, where acceptance is conditional on continued drug use. And again she looks to herself for an explanation. She was unsure of herself.

This practice, of viewing her experiences in a positive, uncritical light, continued when we discussed racism.

Question: Somebody the other day [in a focus group discussion with other students] mentioned racism. Do you think that was a problem at (name of school)?

L: Mmm, I didn't experience it so much. And people do say (name of school) is such an open school because there's these kind of people and those kind of people but it's not really like that.

Question: Mmmhmm

L: It's like a mask. They show one thing but when you're on the inside of it it's not like that at all. And for me personally I didn't experience any racism but I know that there was you know, fights between this kind of group of people and another group from (another school)... but personally I didn't experience anything like that but I know that it happened. I heard lots of you know, mean things being said about people who had different sexual orientations and all that kind of stuff.

She seems to understand racism as overt, blatant acts that she herself didn't experience. But she also says that the image of acceptance is "like a mask." And her own experiences of non-acceptance seem to support the idea that the school didn't meet her expectations. And what of subtle racisms? Like not seeing yourself in the images included in the school's TV program yearend show. And how did witnessing overt examples of racism toward others contribute to the construction of *her* racial identity? How did her "attempts to survive in school and move out of the margins" (Hudak, 1993, p. 185) lead her to develop a "survival mechanism" of denial? How has she constructed her shyness within a context of power relations within the school? Understanding herself as "shy" is a way of displacing, a way of surviving. As Hudak points out it is a "story of

living in-between regimes of truth" (p. 185). The circumstances of her schooling form part of the narrative that defines her "intersubjective experiences of self and society" (p. 186). How we view ourselves reflects the ways in which we view the world.

Does this young woman's view of the world inside the school, as not really open and accepting, then lead her to certain understandings about herself and the broader world around her? She reflects on her understandings of culture in her own life.

> *L: Sometimes you don't have like a... your culture is not that mmm, important to your family or something like that so they don't teach you about those kind of things. Or like me, if you're mixed then you just never learned anything about anything really so it's kind of, and I kind of, I identify with what's there kind of thing. Because I am part Native so when I see Native dances or whatever I identify with that and then other parts of me I don't really know anything about right?*

What did she learn from reflecting upon the fact that her family didn't teach her much about "those kind of things?" How prepared was she to resist the understandings provided by racist situations in her school? Mahtani (2005) reminds us that mixed race women who may be economically disadvantaged may be less able to challenge identifications such as "mixed race" than those who are socio-economically advantaged. "Race" and class are co-constructed in complex ways. The young woman quoted above certainly doesn't deny her mixed race but indicates she doesn't "know what my heritage really is." She knows one of her parents is Aboriginal and the other parent is Black. She identifies with what she is exposed to, that is Aboriginal elements of culture, but has yet to explore the tensions inherent in a more complex subjectivity.

White and Disenfranchised

Many of the students at ICHS identify as White. How might *their* subjectivities have been formed in public high schools? I have read and engaged with literature on White privilege over the years of my graduate studies. While I find much of it is relevant to *me* and my view of and position in the world, I also struggle to relate it to a population of disenfranchised urban youth. Some people have suggested to me that there is a difference between the Aboriginal and "mixed race" youth in my study and the White youth. The White youth don't experience racism along with the other forms of violence and neglect in their lives. While this is certainly true I have difficulty viewing a lack of racism as a "privilege." Clearly it is a basic human right. So how might the literature inform my analysis of White disenfranchised youth?

Most of the literature on White privilege assumes middle class status. With this underlying assumption, writers such as Tatum (1999) argue that while "the concept of identity is a complex one" (p. 59) there is a process many White people evolve through in the development of a White racial identity. The first stage is contact, best described as obliviousness. Being White is viewed as a "normal state of being that is rarely reflected upon" (p. 57). The privileges associated with being White are taken for granted. This may be followed by disintegration, often a result of increased interactions with people of color. Greater awareness is "often accompanied by feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness" which can be a catalyst for action (or denial). Finally, pseudoindependence, is characterized by "an intellectual understanding of the unfairness of racism as a system of advantage and a need to assume personal responsibility for dismantling it" (p. 58).

This process sounds like one engaged in by people who have the knowledge and understanding to formulate these thoughts. It sounds academic. It sounds like the process I have gone through to become what Tatum calls a "White ally" or border person. But where would I locate disenfranchised urban youth? They have continuous interactions with people of color. Many of their friends are Aboriginal or "mixed race." But this didn't come about as the result of a change in lifestyle that led their paths to cross. They were always together. Bound by the material conditions of their lives. One student reflects on peer relations within the school.

> *The [public] school that I [attended] was very separated by all the races... [at] this school [ICHS] everyone gets along because of their personalities. (ICHS Student)*

They have always been friends, part of the same group. Are they aware of their "Whiteness?" It would seem to me that they would have to be. Relationally, they know they weren't victims of racial abuse in school. So they know they are White. But what then is the cause of the abuse they did receive? How do their understandings of being ignored by teachers and socially isolated from peers inform their subjectivities? In reference to public school teachers, one White youth said they "might be a little bit more critical of things that happen and not understanding why you got into something [trouble] or whatever. That you're just a problem kid."

He knows himself as a "problem kid." He also displays an understanding of underlying causes of his behavior when he indicates there is a *why* behind his behavior. He is different from other youth who don't cause "problems." What does he also understand from this awareness? Do the youth who aren't "problem kids" share his

socioeconomic background? Did they have difficulties at home? I asked him about racial problems in his school. He took a philosophical approach to answering the question, possibly in keeping with Tatum's first stage of identity development. He maybe didn't think the question applied to him directly, because he is a White person.

> *There's a lot of prejudice in public schools and I think it also comes from because there's so many kids you don't know each other as well and with a separation like that it can actually, there can be a wall up between different groups and then each other but they just know that they're different and there's a lot of prejudice that goes on just because of ignorance. (ICHS Student)*

He noticed prejudice but he attributes it to school size. Did he notice differences? Was there a hierarchy of group status in the school? Is this simply a result of lack of understanding? Well maybe, but it's a *big* lack of understanding. And what does all of this tell *him* about himself? Where does he fit in? Is he at the top of the heap because he is White or at the bottom because he is poor? Does gender inform his subject position? What happens to a person's sense of self when they can see other White folks in positions of privilege while they themselves don't experience the same status? Even if he doesn't understand the academic concept of "White privilege" he can see it around him.

What stories does this youth tell to explain to himself his lack of privilege? Again, he points to school size.

> *With a lot of people there is like a lot of anonymity, you don't really feel like you really know anybody. (ICHS Student)*

Like the young woman discussed earlier in this chapter, this youth also adapted his behavior to find a place of acceptance.

I kind of fell into the drug group or whatever and that kind of made it hard to go to school and on top of that the lack of support from the teachers just made it almost impossible for me to learn anything at all. So I dropped out because I decided I just wanted to start working. I moved out of my mom's place. (ICHS Student)

He became a "druggie" which then informed his subjectivity. Did it provide him with an explanation for his lack of privileged status? Drugs primarily led him out of school. Lack of support from teachers is secondary. That is, his failure to complete is viewed as being his own fault. Yet he also understands something about his social positioning based on family status.

None of my family had even really finished high school. So I didn't really view university as any kind of a practical situation. (ICHS Student)

While he didn't talk at all about the fact that he is White he does understand that he is poor. Yet both factors inform his subjectivity in various ways. He knows what he is not. He clearly knows he is poor. What I can't derive from the data is whether or not being White builds his sense of self by increasing his status because he is not a person of color *or* if it works to point out his lack because he is not like majority White people. Probably some combination of both these ideas create tensions he has yet to resolve.

In recent years, scholarship has begun to emerge that looks at the intersections of White as a racial category with working class socioeconomic status. Paul Willis's influential work, *Learning to labor* (Willis, 1981) marks a beginning point for these discussions. While Willis has been criticized for his failure to interrogate the "lads" racial identities as an important component of their subjectivities, he certainly paints an

informative picture of a White working class experience. Within the bounds of my research a working class identity is not clearly relevant as the youth in my context are poor, many having shared experiences of abject poverty. However, as Apple (2004a) points out, Willis's work enables us to "recapture our sense of what class means and how it works" (p. 80). The lads were often racist in their comments about other identifiable groups within the British working class. Willis says, "three distinct groups – Caucasians, Asians, and West Indians – are clearly visible in most school settings" (p. 47). The lads view group separation as "rejection of others" and, as noted, simply "different color can be enough to justify an attack or intimidation" (p. 48). Willis doesn't examine what this means for the lads, but clearly they see themselves in opposition to the racial others. They also believe that school staff supports them in these beliefs whether or not they say so publicly. The truth of this statement matters little if the lads believe it to be true. It serves to validate their beliefs in the superiority of their own racial identities. The youth at ICHS view separation between racial groups as largely negative as reflected in the comment above referring to a wall between groups. But similar to the lads, they too view themselves in opposition to other groups.

Other studies support the idea that social class is an important factor in a "White" racial identity. Wellman (1999) talks about his experiences growing up in a Black, working class neighborhood in Detroit. As the only White family on the block he knew he was White. Whiteness was "never an unmarked category" for him, unlike the description of Tatum's process of the development of a White racial identity. In Wellman's neighborhood, though, people didn't talk about his family's "Whiteness" but instead talked about his parent's communist politics. This was a big deal in early 1950s in

America. His family was known as the "Reds," the communists. Working class was normal, the unmarked category. As a child he knew he wasn't Black and as an adult he knew was uncomfortable joining the White middle class. He points out that being defined negatively, as not someone else "does not convey the depth and complexity of my experience; the richness and diversity of the self I have constructed" (p. 85).

Weis (2004) revisits her earlier ethnographic investigation of White working class female students and how identities are formed within complex relations within the school. While these women currently hold full-time positions in the labor market, and most have realized their goals of not being wholly dependent on a man, a significant proportion experience abuse at the hands of men. Weis points out that these women have not been able to "escape the violence associated with the ways in which patriarchy plays out historically and continues to play out in this particular class fraction" (p. 128). Weis argues that it is conceivable that "the physical cruelty of White working class men becomes their last defensive resort – their last solidly and visible patriarchal stand in a world that has stripped them of alternative forms of power" (p. 129).

From Wellman, Weis and others (L.M. Brown, 2001; Jones, 2001) we learn that social class plays a significant role in the development of White subjectivities. L. M. Brown (2001) found that White working class girls were acutely aware of "the expectations to perform idealized notions of white middle-class femininity even as they experience the complexity of their lives – a complexity that assures them and others that they are, as it were, a bad fit within such a narrow context" (p. 107). The contradictions they live during early adolescence puts them at odds with the expectations of middle-class teachers underscoring their displacement in school and in White middle-class

society. Against the idealized notions of femininity the working class girls' voices sound "off-key" so that the "very behavior that frees them from stereotypical gender conventions may also label them" (p. 108).

Certainly now I can begin to see a closer fit between the disenfranchised urban youth of my study and literature on White subjectivities once social class is considered. While there are still class differences between this group of youth and the working class youth of the above noted studies, some connections can be made. How might we get at the depth and complexity of the experiences of this particular group of disenfranchised urban youth? Is "social class" an unmarked category for these youth? As we have already seen it appears that they *do* see social class and know that they are at the lower end of it. Yet, like Wellman, they are more comfortable being with others who share the material circumstances of their lives. How do they view the racial differences within their class grouping? One girl who had experienced a lot of racially based "teasing" when she left her Reserve school to attend school in a nearby city said this of ICHS:

V: I came here and I like it.

Question: And what do you like about it here?

V: The students or the other people are easy to get along with and they accept you and all that.

Question: Mmmhmm. So there isn't any problems here with, I mean here there's different people mixed together too, right? There's some Aboriginal people, some White students, some whatever. And that seems to work here?

V: Mmmhmm. It works.

Question: Everybody's accepting of each other.

V: Yeah.

Question: And do you have any thoughts on why that is, why it works well here, that mix of students?

V: I don't even know

While she doesn't indicate a deeper understanding of why this particular mix seems to work well, she reveals an understanding in relation to earlier schooling experiences.

V: On the reserves I never got teased. Only when I went to White schools and that's when everyone started.

Question: You say "teased" which isn't necessarily a negative word but was it sort of joking teasing or kind of more nasty teasing?

V: Yeah, more like mean, like trying to pull you down and all that.

Clearly in this dialogue she reveals an understanding of racial differences and indicates that those racial differences were the cause of the abuse she received. Coming to ICHS she must still see those racial differences but notices that she is no longer a victim of abuse because of them. Racial differences do not appear as a negative to her in this context.

Students tend to get along at ICHS regardless of skin color. Is it that they are bound together by poverty? Do their similarities in social condition isolate them from their differences? This same youth reveals something else about her early schooling.

V: I really liked the reserve school. It really made me feel comfortable and all that. Because they were my people and they really made me feel at home, no one ever teased me or anything as I was growing up. My cousin was right in there and I got close to everyone and that.

There's that word "comfortable" again. And it isn't just due to an absence of difficulties in school. She identifies with "my people." She sees herself as like them. They are "family." The "White" schools made her feel uncomfortable. So did some other aspects of her life.

V: My mom, she moved a lot, like they [parents] had problems and she always like took off and I was just like stuck going with her and that.

Question: Mmmhmm. So how did you find schooling then when you were...

V: It was pretty difficult. It really like threw me off, like I could never stay in, like whenever I got stuck in one school and I was ready to go and all that and then she'd move back and I couldn't stay there any more.

Moving around was a problem for her like many of the youth at ICHS. Family problems are something they have in common as well.

V: I've always had like difficulties [in school] because I have problems at home and like I miss a lot of school because of that.

Question: Mmmhmm.

V: But...

Question: Is it better now that you're with your sister?

V: Mmm, yeah it's a little better. Yeah, because my mom, she used to just like drink and all that and it's not that good but now I'm with my sister and it's alright now.

But how do the White youth view racial differences given that I was talking about subjectivities of disenfranchised *White* youth? How easy it is to slip back into the data of the Aboriginal youth when entering a discussion about "race!" What do the White youth

say about the racial mix at ICHS and why it seems to work? While not talking specifically about "race" one female student said this about ICHS.

C: If you're your own person they respect that.

Two male students agreed.

D: Like the social structure is very strong. It's not, like [C] was saying, two faced... two faced people. You're based on just who you are and the way you act and respecting your own experience. And it's really good that, you know, people appreciate everyone's space here and everyone gets along.

K: [teachers names] they all come from fairly rough background. So they really connect... the students and their problems... they treat you like a person.

Within these comments they identify an atmosphere of respect. Respecting others and "respecting your own experience." Wow. I love that thought – "respecting your own experience." Not just learning to like yourself in spite of all you have been through or done but actually *respecting* your own lived reality. How did they develop these understandings? This question is pursued through a look at pedagogical practice in the next chapter. These students see commonalities between *all* students in terms of coming from rough backgrounds. They identify with similarities rather than being separated by differences. For these White youth, the racial differences of their public schooling experiences are now flattened out by socioeconomic similarities.

White and Privileged

I have earlier noted the relevance of the concept of White privilege in terms of my understandings of my own subjectivity as a teacher and researcher. Beyond an

acknowledgement of my own location, what have I learned about myself from the youth in this study? And what is the historically affected consciousness, the "experience that experiences reality and is itself real" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 346) related to the concept of "White privilege?" How do I experience reality as a White person and in what ways does my reality grow out of historical conditions of racism that position White people in positions of privilege? And how is my reality *real* in terms of the ways in which I enact it in my daily life in relation to others, particularly in the inner city school of my study?

Given that "experience is valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 350) leads me to consider my early understandings of my own racial identity. As Tatum (1999) noted in her discussion of White racial identity development, as a child and youth I viewed my Whiteness as "normal" and only thought about it when I encountered non-White people in my predominantly White community. Other than the few Aboriginal families in town, the only non-White people were children who had been adopted by White families. This scenario is an interesting one. Clearly the "normal" family unit was White – even for non-Whites since they were a part of White families.

I recall when my older sister was in high school her class had a student teacher who had earlier immigrated, with her family, from India. My sister and her friends were in awe of the beautiful young woman with the long black hair and gorgeous brightly colored saris. She was definitely the "exotic other" a sight never before seen in our little town! What did she tell us about ourselves? I understood a universal concept of "Whiteness" by learning a language for what wasn't viewed as normal. An understanding

of North American Indians was now expanded to include East Indians. In relation in any of these "others" I was normal. White and middle class.

Certainly I didn't think about privilege. I remember once complaining about the paleness of my skin when we were driving to the beach. My mother said, "When you are older you will appreciate it." Given that my mother was the one in my family who at least made an attempt to promote racial understanding, I understood her to mean that I would have an easier time in life being White than if I were not. So maybe I did think a little bit about privilege but only in the sense that privilege was normal. After all, I am White! I certainly didn't think about structures in society that *allow* Whites access to education, good jobs, and all the benefits those lead to. I didn't think about what it would be like to be the young Indian student teacher with all of us looking at her. I didn't have the language to formulate those concepts at the time.

How did my field of vision become open to new experience? Gadamer (1989) tells us "experience is essentially dependent on constant confirmation" (p. 352). My experience of "White as normal" stopped being confirmed once I moved to Edmonton, although the process was slow. At first, I certainly noticed people who weren't White but they didn't directly affect my life so didn't challenge my assumptions in any significant way. But the image was now imperfect. Things were not as I had previously thought. But the experience also has to turn back on itself – the experiencer has to become aware of the experience. At this point I wasn't aware that "Whiteness" might not be the norm. The dialectical movement of consciousness came about more when I got to know my neighbor on a personal level. She was a woman who had come from India as a young child and grew up in northern Alberta before moving to Edmonton. Our children played

together and we spent a lot of time chatting as we kept an eye on them. I began to understand that the *real* person I now knew was different from the assumptions I had held about Indian people. She was not what I had supposed her to be. This experience was followed by many similar experiences, within my graduate program in particular, that now confirmed a new *truth* about people who I had supposed to be *different*. This *truth* stands in opposition to absolute, repeatable knowledge but rather "implies an orientation toward new experience" (p. 355). It is an "openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself" (p. 355).

So nothing returns to what it was before. We are all experiencing our place in an historical unfolding. We are operating within a tradition, a language that relates itself to us. The knowledge acquired through the experience of language is an understanding of another person. So what of the students at ICHS? Gadamer (1989) explains that "the teacher-pupil relationship" is "an authoritative form of welfare work" that robs the student's claim of legitimacy (p. 360). So how do I ensure that I am not overlooking the youths' claims and allowing them to truly speak for themselves? As a White teacher and researcher, how do I become and remain, open to the experiences of White youth and of non-White youth? It is somehow in the readiness to experience. It is in the awareness that things are not naturally a certain way by virtue of having always been that way *for us*.

Gender

I struggle to understand what gender means in a context of disenfranchised urban youth. As is the case with the concept of "White privilege," the literature on gender often assumes middle class status. To a certain extent common experiences of homelessness,

street involvement, violence, and abuse flatten out gender differences. Similar to the ways in which racial differences are lessened by socioeconomic similarities, males and females are bound together in struggles to get by in difficult environments. In other respects differences are apparent. These same common experiences have differing effects along gender lines. While material and social conditions have created disenfranchisement for both males and females this disenfranchisement is manifest differently according to gender.

The word *gender* was supposed to clarify our understanding of the social construct of sex, to "depict that which is socially constructed as opposed to that which is biologically given" (Nicholson, 1995, p. 39). The practice of cheerleading provides an example.

> *It's good to see [differences] on a cheer team because the one we had at [name of school] there was three White people on it. That's it... and the other girls didn't know what they were doing... they have their little head things or whatever, but that's like their religion... you're suppose to have your hair in ribbons... [they] couldn't wear the traditional uniforms. (ICHS Student)*

Cultural differences are highlighted here in the ways in which gender is socially constructed. For this student female gender was naturalized in the wearing of skimpy outfits and hair ribbons. And to fit this image it seems one has to be White given her surprise at the relatively small number of White girls on the cheer squad. For the rest of the girls on the cheer team clearly culture and religion construct female gender in a different way. Social class also informs this girl's subjectivity in relation to gender. In reference to a different school she says,

[Name of school] has an awesome cheer team, everybody knows that. (ICHS Student)

Commenting on the same school though, she indicates a socioeconomic interpretation of those who are involved with cheerleading in the school.

If you're not prep you're getting picked on (ICHS Student)

Now it appears that those who form the cheer teams in schools are White, preppy, dressed in hair ribbons, and come from the middle class. She knows that even though she is White and female she does not belong in this group.

I left and my friends slowly all left the school because it was changing (ICHS Student)

Nicholson explains that gender refers to personality traits and behaviors and is increasingly used to differentiate social constructions that separate female bodies from male bodies. But if the body is seen through social interpretation, then sex is not separate from gender but "subsumable under it" (p. 39). Gender is the "knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences" (Scott, cited in Nicholson, 1995, p. 39). Cross-cultural interpretations of gender cannot look to the body for male/female distinctions. The human population differs in social expectations regarding how we think, feel, and act but also "in the ways the body is viewed" and the relationship between views and expectations (p. 43). Culturally varied understandings of the human body do not remain constant over time. Nicholson tells us the tendency to think of sex identity as common cross-culturally is powerful and historically rooted in modern Western societies. An emerging feminism of difference, while pointing to individual identities, also uncovered patterns of gender that allowed women to understand their circumstances in social terms

(p. 59). What seems to be important to understand about gender is the complexity of the concept. The body is an historically specific variable whose meaning and import is recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts" (p. 61). The meaning of "women" for example needs to be developed through an intersection of similarities and differences. It also needs to be done with an understanding that how we choose to represent a concept such as "woman" is emotionally charged and part of a political struggle. For those who are disenfranchised this notion raises questions regarding who gets to engage in the struggle. Who defines how the concepts of male and female are represented for those who do not have a voice? It seems that these young men and women are defined by what they lack in terms of culturally informed middle class, mainstream ideals of gender.

In the context of my study, I can see that there would be broadly defined differences between Aboriginal, "mixed race," and White youth in relation to gender. The issues of intergenerational effects of colonialism and the internalization of negative images by Aboriginal youth are discussed in the previous chapter. Certainly racism is a factor affecting the youth of color in this context. But the above interpretation of gender, as presented by Nicholson, does not account for social class. While there is some discussion about understanding circumstances in social terms, the disenfranchised youth of this study have not had the opportunity to develop these understandings through the language of formal education and the "privileged location of knowledge" (Mohanty, 1995, p. 75). One of the youth workers talks about an issue that grows out of personal circumstances of violence and abuse that would be difficult to locate in the literature on gender.

L: I actually still see his [former student] sister when she...

Question: She's on the streets...

L: Yeah, she works on the streets. And it's a shame. It's a shame because she was coming here for a little while too and she seemed genuinely motivated to change that lifestyle. And then the same thing happened. She disappeared and...

Question: The obstacles are so great for them. You know whereas working the streets, there's money coming in, you're being taken care of...

L: And they need the drugs too and, you know, to numb the pain of the reality and, like my little sister's out there, you know. She's working the streets out there. She has been for the past four years.

One of the girls being talked about is Aboriginal and the other is White. What are their socially constructed interpretations of gender? Does "race" come into the discussion here? Certainly historically constructed understandings of intergenerational cycles of poverty and abuse would reveal some differences between how the two girls got to the streets of Edmonton, but does that really matter at this point? At a human level, they both suffer the effects of these intergenerational cycles. One also has the additional burden of racism. The Youth Worker offered this about the former student above and the student's sister.

L: The foster parents were chronic alcoholics. They used to beat him and his sister all the time...

So what now of gender? One former student was a boy, the other a girl. In what ways do they experience this abuse differently? Certainly in keeping with the literature that leads boys into violent lifestyles selling drugs and girls to work the streets as victims of

violence. According to Tanner (2001), males and females are differentially affected by experiences of growing up in coercive domestic environments. Girls are much more likely to be arrested for running away from home, or for prostitution, than are boys. Girls are more likely to be sexually abused and the abuse starts at an earlier age. Psychological stress resulting from these experiences tends to start at an early age and is often manifest in disruptive conduct in school. Running away from abusive environments and/or becoming involved in prostitution means facing judicial punishment from the authority personnel who were supposed to protect them from abuse, not contribute to it. Boys tend to engage more in violent behaviors resulting from environments that include parental conflict and parental aggressiveness (Gorman-Smith & Avery, 1999).

The White male youth mentioned above was a student in my class for a short time. Certainly he was a victim of parental aggressiveness and violence in the home. I worried about him as did other staff members. Some mornings he was the only one in my class. We would just sit and talk. He was obviously in pain. He would tell me he hadn't slept the night before because of the drunken party going on in his house. He would show me the "tattoos" he was carving into his arms with a pen. I listened, encouraged him to talk, and suggested we (teachers and youth workers) could help out with whatever he needed. Like his sister, he too disappeared, stopped coming to school. Last we heard he was selling drugs. So what of gender? How is "male" socially constructed in this context?

Much of the literature on gender not only assumes middle class but also assumes *female*. Males are supposed to be doing just fine, especially White males. But what if they aren't? What knowledge establishes meaning for this young man? As a male is he supposed to be able to protect himself? Is he supposed to be able to protect his sister?

What if he can't? Then the option is to escape, physically by running away, and mentally into a world of drugs and alcohol. But how does he *feel* about himself as a result of all this? Certainly stress, antisocial behavior, and depression correlate with psychosocial stressors such as physical or sexual abuse, having a parent with significant mental health or substance use disorder, and living in high crime neighborhoods (Attar 1994; Huston 1994; Buckner 2001). And a youth who carves his arms with a pen clearly doesn't feel very good about who he is as a person.

Then there is his sister. How are women represented in this context and how would she choose to represent herself? At a time of emerging subjectivity what does prostitution say to a girl about herself? Evelyn Lau (1989) reflects on her personal experiences as a prostitute.

> *All my brain cells scream to ignore or deny what Roy is saying, but then it sinks in that he is right. The possibility has never struck me before; I'd always assumed that the men were the evil, disgusting creatures, that they were the ones hurting women, and especially prostitutes. But the money I earned on the street wasn't for basic survival anymore, so who was I to call myself pure?*
>
> *In that one moment I realized that I was trash. I was a slut. (p. 171).*

While Lau reflects at length in other parts of her diary, about the role played by her emotionally abusive parents in leading her to run away, she doesn't connect that understanding to this passage. She believes she is trash because she is a prostitute. Her friend supports that notion, as does the vast majority of the society in which she lives. What started out as a way to survive, to take care of her self now informs her subjectivity as "trash." Why is it that going beyond "basic survival" leads her to this conclusion? Why

can't she expect more for herself? Is it because she is "trash" that she doesn't deserve the material comforts that others have?

Prostitution leads to some interesting thoughts about social expectations and the ways in which the body is viewed. The term "gender" was initially intended to supplement the term "sex." If the physiological self was the "location for establishing where specific social influences are to go" then the "relationship between biology and socialization makes possible what can be described as a 'coat-rack' view of self-identity" (Nicholson, 1995, p. 41). The body can be viewed as a type of rack upon which "differing cultural artifacts, especially those of personality and behavior, are thrown" (p. 41). In recognizing that this understanding of differences is rigidly binary Nicholson troubles the ways in which we give meaning to the body. Certainly this concept presents difficulties in relation to prostitution. Did you know that if you look up "rack" in a thesaurus you find the words "spread" and "stretch" as synonyms? And what "cultural artifacts" of street life should we add to the mix? Clearly the "coat-rack" analysis provides a middle class understanding of gender, an unfortunate analogy. Nicholson clarifies this understanding as rooted in a worldview in the early modern period in Western Europe and North America where biology was seen as the basis of social distinctions.

We now need to be considering a diverse set of meanings in an attempt to complexify gender analysis. In this context (and others) we need to consider historical conditions related to social class and race relations in Canada. We need to see gender differences as affecting the criteria of what it means to be a man or a woman in diverse societies. What does it mean to be a woman on the streets of inner city Edmonton? When you "sell" your body for sex in order to survive how do you view your body? How do

we give meaning to the female body in this time and place? It seems to me the body is a site of struggle to maintain dignity, a struggle to find ways to protect against physical harm, and a struggle for self-identity that doesn't require drug induced escapism. Gender subjectivities in this context are read against a "norm" that says the behavior of prostitution is morally repugnant and those who engage in this behavior (disenfranchised female victims of abuse) are trash.

I have engaged with a particular profile of gender here. While this is certainly not an uncommon profile of the disenfranchised urban youth that come and go from ICHS, there are many gendered subjectivities within the school. For example, a young mixed race woman talked about her need for acceptance and how she let her boyfriend dictate her behavior.

> *I let those people [boyfriend] kind of direct my (life) and I should have been directing my own. And for awhile I did really good because you know those people weren't around, maybe they went to jail or whatever. (ICHS Student)*

This young woman's desire to be accepted by her boyfriend, who is also the father of her child created a dependency that influenced her choices. She talked about how he didn't want her to go to school and about her spiral into drug dependency when she was with him. Engaging in drug use and related behaviors informed her subjectivity as a "really bad druggie." Knowing that her boyfriend was the only person she had to depend on may have informed her belief that "I just find it hard to communicate with other people." As a woman she learned that she needed to depend on a man and that she was bound by the restrictions he placed on her behavior if she wanted to remain with him.

I should also clarify that youth who are currently involved with the use of heavy drugs are asked to leave the school and come back when they are clean. This practice is necessary because this drug use affects their ability to engage with school and also tends to mean they pull other youth into behaviors related to drug use rather than *being* pulled into schooling. Additionally, with drug use often comes more violent lifestyles that need to be kept outside of the school.

> *If you're violent towards another person you have to leave the school. And that makes for a safer environment... for other people. And the fact that you aren't allowed to talk about, like if you went out and got smashed on the weekend too, because like [name of teacher] always says, there are people here who are recovering from those kind of things and they don't need to be sitting and listening to you talk about that. (ICHS Student)*

Many youth who arrive at the school are still coming off heavy drug use and are occasionally "slipping." School staff endeavors to maintain a safe environment in the school. However, students who are asked to leave are always given the benefit of the doubt and are always welcomed back regardless of the reasons they left.

Female and Middle Class

My own gendered subjectivity, as a middle class woman, may be considered utilizing a complexified "coat-rack" analogy. My female body I tried to disguise as a male throughout most of my childhood. I wore my hair short and boys clothes. I was a tomboy. I wanted to be like my older brother. I knew he was my father's favorite. It was better to be a boy. Everyone knew that. You could pee in the bushes when you were out

playing. While clearly my father contributed to my desire to be a boy, he wasn't the only social influence in my life. In small town Manitoba in the 60s and 70s women were homemakers and men worked outside of the home. If you happened to be educated like the one female physician in town you could get away with working *part* time, but otherwise, women who worked were "working class." They *had* to work outside the home. And even "outside the home" is a more recent understanding. It was more common to say, "my mother doesn't work" or "my mother stays home." What did she do? Did she sleep all day? No one knew. We weren't at home to notice.

This *norm* has to be understood within the context of time and place. The idea of middle class urban White women staying home to tend to children and the house was promoted as an ideal following the Second World War in Canada. It quickly became a status symbol. It was a sign that a man could look after his family. My mother had a university degree in Interior Design but she aspired to be a good housewife. When my parents had both passed away my sister and I sorted through their "stuff" in an attempt to empty the family home and sell it. We found stacks of Good Housekeeping magazines, recipes, menus, and journals outlining plans to make house and home a shining example of domestic bliss. Clearly at one point in time she had hoped for a career. What changed? What messages would a female child derive from her actions? That she couldn't or shouldn't have a career? That she would be looked after? That she *needed* to be looked after as the "weaker" sex?

Being male was "normal," something to aspire to. It was in my tomboy behavior and in the behaviors of women as they began to leave the home and enter the public realm of work. We can be just like men (in spite of our weaker female bodies) as

evidenced by the 1970s "phallocentric denials of the legitimacy of gender as a category" (Mohanty, 1995, p. 68). This period of denial was followed by two decades of "feminist political activism and scholarship in a variety of sociopolitical and geographical locations, questions of difference (sex, race, class, nation), experience, and history" (p. 68). We seem now to be in a new period of *feminisation* characterized by "the rise of women's employment and economic power" and "self-invention by women in the new labor market" (Walkerdine, 2004, p. 98). While the opening up of areas of the labor market offers exciting possibilities for women it also brings the double burden of work and family. I'd like to engage with this concept further but I have to go pick up my daughter from school now…

Okay, now where was I? Oh yeah, double burden of work and family. I don't really think of it as a burden though. While recognizing my disproportionate share of childcare I also am blessed with three wonderful children who provide me with an opportunity to reflect on what children should be. That is, well taken care of, loved, loving, happy, caring, and giving. They are what I would want for the youth at ICHS if we could change their realities. I learn from my children and I learn from the youth in this study. I have learned that young girls who work the streets and young boys, who sell drugs and live violent lives, are people. They are individuals with their own claims to legitimacy. I viewed street life through a middle class lens, seeing "prostitutes" and "drug dealers." In so doing, I robbed them of their voice, judged them, and failed to understand them. A clear point of understanding for me is the time I spent talking with the former student discussed above. Things I had read and thought I understood now came alive as I got to know this youth on a personal level. It helped me to understand other youth as

well, to *really* listen to what they have to say, without judging them. The next step then was to *value* what they have to say, to incorporate their lived experiences into the classroom. This is the topic of the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter looked at intersections of poverty and gender and the ways in which subjectivities are formed in schools. In this study, the ways students were made to feel about themselves are central to their processes of leaving public school environments. While they tended to take personal responsibility for their lack of academic and social success in schools, analysis of their interview data reveals important understandings they hold about how disenfranchised inner city youth are treated in schools. This study also informs our perceptions of "White privilege" in that an assumed connection between White and privilege is not relevant when applied to disenfranchised urban youth. These youth comprehend Whiteness differently as viewed through a lens of material and social disadvantage. Complexities within notions of gender also appear in this inner city context. Certainly there are differences between the ways males and females experience their difficult social circumstances but at the same time they share similarities of disenfranchisement. They are all touched by violence, hunger, homelessness, and prejudice. Understanding the real person behind the labels of prostitution, drug dealer, disenfranchised urban youth, or problem kid, are crucial to giving young people a voice, allowing subjectivities to emerge that speak to who these people are and want to be. Creating conditions for dialogue that encourage consciousness of the social and societal

conditions of the lives of these youth may lead to a degree of comfort they did not experience in public schools.

Chapter 6: Tensions of Pedagogy

> Educators have developed categories and modes of perception which reify or thingify individuals so that they (the educators) can confront students as institutional abstractions rather than as concrete persons with whom they have real ties in the process of cultural and economic reproduction (Apple, 2004c, p. 126).

Introduction

How do we come to understand the ways in which we "thingify" youth in schools and how objectification *prevents* us as teachers, from successful intervention? When we begin to talk about the *tensions* within pedagogical practice, an image of a larger field of tensions in schools emerge. We can understand this difficult moment through a historical awareness of ongoing theoretical and pedagogical struggles in schools. My intent in this chapter is to further the understandings of a particular tension of pedagogy and thereby contribute to an ongoing conversation, shedding light on a particular moment of an evolving concept. The interpretation I offer is meant to render this familiar tension "readable again by reopening it to new, generative instances" (Jardine, 1998, p. 41). The understandings of disenfranchised urban youth that are highlighted in the previous chapter are the foundation upon which this chapter on pedagogy is built.

Social Constructions of Labeling

While many teachers and youth workers at the school have keen insight into the realities of street life and the needs of the youth who come to their school, meeting these needs is not a straightforward process. These youth have been through many years of

school, social, and justice system involvement that has labeled them in various ways. The effects of this labeling are reflected in the following comment.

> *When someone's been told for so long that they're not smart and that they can't do it they begin to believe that themselves. (ICHS Teacher).*

We *know* labels are problematic. We've known this for years. That's why we stopped "streaming" students into separate schools and programs. Yet labels are still around and so is streaming. We now call streaming "choice" and new labels are designed to "help." These very labels, designed to accommodate youth through appropriate interventions, instead "hide what are profound interrelations between persons through the use of a 'neutral' commodity language" (Apple, 2004c, p. 126). By creating conditions within which young people become abstractions we cease to see them as persons and we fail to comprehend the impact, of the ways in which we construct youth, on how youth understand themselves.

We also need to recognize that these "categories" that we place youth into are themselves social constructs. That is, we are creating categories that grow out of value-laden judgments about what youth *should* be (middle class) and then using those very labels as a way of denying and devaluing the person they really are. One early service teacher at ICHS points out,

> *I've never worked with this population of people ever and like coming from where I've come from is very different... I have come from a very comfortable lifestyle. (ICHS Teacher)*

She recognizes social class differences between teachers and the disenfranchised urban youth she is teaching, but fails to comprehend how these differences affect the ways in which she interprets and constructs youth.

> *I think [name of student] is lucky cause she has some of that classiness, there's somewhere in there that in her brain that she's actually a positive kid and wants to do something [be a positive influence on her siblings]. But the other stuff gets in the way... she doesn't want to go back to jail. (ICHS Teacher)*

So in order to have "classiness" (middle class) you have to be "positive." A "positive kid" is one who wants to help her siblings, stay out of jail, and do something with their life. And a "kid" like that would embody her belief of what youth should be. Middle class. At the same time she seems to be saying that "this population of people" by their very nature could not hold these "middle class" values. Her words spoke to me as a teacher. I was already familiar with what she was saying about disenfranchised youth as I too entered this school environment with middle class values firmly entrenched. I too come from a comfortable lifestyle. I was implicated by her words "as if she spoke about something in which I was somehow already involved" (Jardine, 1998, p. 40). I was definitely involved. I *was* that teacher, and was complicit in imposing similar social constructions on students. Exploring the meanings inherent in her words brings new meanings to *me* about how language serves to rout us out, to expose our *true* beliefs and understandings. We can quite easily learn to talk the talk, but walking it relies on deeper fundamental changes.

Educators have the "power to 'impose' these social constructions on others" (Apple, 2004c, p. 126). Some students are "academically advanced" while others are "at-

risk" of "early school leaving." I have chosen to use the term "disenfranchised" which is also not a neutral term. Clearly it is difficult to talk about *groups* of students without using some sort of a label. A senior teacher troubles this thought.

> *I think there's room at the university for a minor in, I know that there's a lot of controversy, that they're youth at risk but call them whatever you want, high need youth or youth who have had difficulty in the traditional system, but it's a problem and I personally believe there should be a minor ... but at the very least there should be a couple courses that student teachers are required to take... there should be some understanding. (ICHS Teacher)*

He understands there are problems with labels but what *do* you call this group of youth? Often though, these labels are used uncritically, without an awareness of the assumptions behind the labels and the ways in which they construct youth. These labels are treated as commonsense rather than as historically constructed products of institutions and social conditions. The term "at-risk" has been used uncritically for a number of years and continues to be used, albeit as a troubled concept, in the absence of another more definitive term. As I interpret the case of ICHS and build a story to tell, the concept of "at-risk" becomes significantly striking so as to urge me to further understanding. In this incident the concept generates new understanding.

Origins of "at-risk"

Coming to appreciate the lives and circumstances of those *most* "at-risk" made me question the many ways in which this term has been used. At my daughter's middle class elementary school an "at-risk" discourse was adopted in response to government funding

cutbacks to schools, to point to the needs of those students who weren't reading at grade level in early primary grades. No other risk factors were seemingly apparent and I could certainly question whether not reading at grade level in these first few years of school is a risk factor at all for these children. So the school was using an available and accepted discourse to further their aims for additional funding in a school that is already at the top of the testing hierarchy. This experience led me to question commonsense notions I had held and the ways in which middle class schools usurp a language designed initially to address the needs of those living in impoverished communities. Having class advantage enabled them to further that class advantage, at the expense of those who are disadvantaged. While I could see the advantages my own children have, I now understood some of the structures in place that contribute to furthering those advantages.

Currently, Alberta Learning uses the term "at risk of leaving school early" to describe students who are disenfranchised and coping with complex problems in their lives (Alberta Learning, 2001, p. ii). This language is evidenced throughout the institution of public schooling in Canada as can be seen in the policy and practices of a number of educational systems (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 321). Wotherspoon and Schissel outline why it is that discourses of children and youth have become so popular in Canadian educational contexts. Widespread designation of learners as "at-risk," "disadvantaged," or "marginalized," is relatively recent, but the identification of students with "disabilities" and "special needs" has a long history. These authors link these "child saving" movements to changing visions of normalcy since the 1870s that arise out of a dual concern for providing opportunities for educationally disadvantaged youth and minimizing the problems these learners pose for mainstream learners in the classroom.

A recent review of literature identified "450 symptoms of difficulty experienced by young school-aged children deemed to be 'at-risk'" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 322). Wow, no wonder we have trouble valuing these children as people! The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently identified children and youth "at-risk" as "those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds where poverty is a frequent common factor" (OECD, 1995, p. 137). While they go on to clarify that "at-risk" is a multi-dimensional concept we know that poverty is a common underlying cause of "at-risk" status. We are not talking about the middle class, the class to which most educators claim membership. As Michelle Fine (1993) elucidates,

> The cultural construction of a group defined through a discourse of risk represents a quite partial image, typically strengthening those institutions and groups that have carved out, severed, denied connection to, and then promised to "save" those who will undoubtedly remain "at-risk" (p. 91).

We can see that children and youth living in poverty are often included in the label "at-risk" but whom else does this label include? Who else have educators marginalized and denied access to? Who else are we working to "save" in ways that allow us to feel good about our own privileged positions in the mainstream of education?

In the context of this study Aboriginal youth have been so labeled. In fact, throughout Alberta, being an "at-risk" youth is highly correlated with being an Aboriginal youth (Alberta Learning, 2001). Many of the youth in my study are deemed to be *doubly* at risk – both poor and Aboriginal (which I guess is better than having 450 risk factors). Recently, in conversation with an Aboriginal graduate student in my department, she pointed out that as a general rule, every child in the detention room in her son's school is Native. Aboriginal youth in the school are labeled "at-risk." As Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) note, "the language of risk can serve as a euphemism for racism,

sexism, and biases based on factors like class and regional inequalities" (p. 331). Labeling Aboriginal students as being "at-risk" makes it "okay" to send them to detention room. In a recent study by Conrad (2004) youth, many of whom were Aboriginal, found the label "at-risk" to be offensive. No doubt, if "at-risk" means Aboriginal and Aboriginal means detention.

The term "at-risk" came into widespread use in relation to the public school system as a whole and was meant to point to the failures and limitations of public education (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Notions of risk have come to represent either failures of public education, or commitment to policies that facilitate the aims of inclusive schooling. The origins of the terminology of "at-risk" illuminate tensions. How do educators best meet the needs of those who are educationally disadvantaged while simultaneously viewing these same students as disruptions in the classroom? How do conceptions of public failures coexist with notions of individual failure? Who is at risk – the school or the child? In what ways do educators reconcile concerns for the rights and needs of particular categories of learners with educational reform's focus on economic competitiveness? If we are to be connecting with the lives of learners how is it that acceptable outcomes in schools are measured by avoidance of behavioral problems? And how do we avoid "behavior problems" *without* connecting with the lives of learners? These questions, highlighting the tensions in pedagogy prevalent at ICHS, call forward the "unanticipated eruption of long-familiar threads of significance and meaning in the midst of a wholly new situation" (Jardine, 1998, p. 40). They signify for me an incident that calls for new understandings, awareness that can be informed by a critical emancipatory practice.

Institutional and Economic Context

Apple (2004c) outlines the ways in which "the abstract categories that grow out of institutional life become quite serious" (p. 127). If an educator can identify a student as having "special needs" or *being* "special needs" he or she can then prescribe general treatments that are uncritically assumed to be neutral and helpful. Since categories such as "special needs," are defined by institutional abstractions, the educator is freed from examining the *context* that defined the category in the first place. It is assumed that the category is neutral and that the child belongs in it. In an attempt to reduce complexity average treatments are provided to meet the needs of abstract categories, serving to protect "both the existing institution and the educator from self-doubt and from the innocence and reality of the child" (p. 127).

Laddish (2002) outlines how this process has significantly evolved in Alberta since 1990. At this time a governmental review on inclusion of students with special needs was undertaken. In 1991, the Minister of Education announced a focus on the integration of students with special needs into the regular classroom. In 1994, general reductions in spending for public education adversely affected these attempts at integration. As a result of changes in school funding, schools wishing to access funds for special needs students would now have to go through a rigorous application process. Relevant to the ICHS context, a grant was made available for severe disabilities funding. Students with severe emotional/behavioral disabilities are funded based on chronic or extreme behaviors requiring constant adult supervision and intensive support services in

order to function in an educational setting. Many students at ICHS have an emotional/ behavior coding of (42) which means:

> A clinical diagnosis within the last 2 years of a severe emotional/behavioral disorder by a psychiatrist, chartered psychologist or a developmental pediatrician is required, in addition to extensive documentation of the nature, frequency and severity of the disorder by school authorities (Alberta Learning, 2004, p. 6).

Within the ICHS population youth who are coded with severe emotional and behavioral disability "present with a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Antisocial Personality Disorder and it must be proven that this disorder causes severe detriment to their learning environment" (Wishart Leard & Linden, 2005, p. 3). We go on to explain that the school must not only demonstrate this detriment in the present context but must also present a documented history of detriment. The necessary behaviors that serve to interfere with the learning environment include: hostility and disobedience towards authority, acts or threats of violence, destroying others' property, lying to and manipulating others, and violating rules. Funding for this code is dependent upon the documented range, frequency and impact of these negative behaviors on the learning environment.

The abstract categories that define ICHS youth, as having special needs understood as severe emotional/behavioral disabilities, arise out of an institutional context that views middle class as the norm. Behaviors that are *different* are labeled *disabilities.* As one senior teacher points out,

> *The problem is that the skills that they've [youth] learned to survive in their environment are actually a trap that keeps them in their environment and they're [these skills] not conducive to academic success at all. (ICHS Teacher)*

So these *skills*, developed through application of one's intellect to the surrounding environment, are the same skills that are categorized as *disabilities* because they are not conducive to formal learning in an academic classroom. Clearly there is a failure to recognize potential for academic development *and* a failure to understand the environmental context of the lives of this population of youth. Again, I too had accepted these assumptions regarding *inability* to perform well in a formal classroom context as an early service teacher. Teaching *these* youth in *this* context revealed something new that wasn't present for me before. This instance makes possible a new understanding, one that is important in keeping a conversation going, "which adds to the story and which thereby changes what we will come to understand" (Jardine, 1998, p. 42) about a segment of the population that is currently under served by schools.

What brought us to this current understanding of special needs categories in schools? Apple (2004c) suggests, "curriculum researchers may be lending the rhetorical prestige of science to what may be questionable practices of an educational bureaucracy and a stratified economic system" (p. 127). Jardine (1998) explains the purpose of a scientific discourse is not on understanding the specific instance but developing ways to control, predict, and manipulate its future reoccurrences. A cognitive process is enacted whereby youths' behaviors are deconstructed, rules for interpreting these behaviors are developed, and solutions are constructed based on these rules. In attempts to control and predict we objectify youth and separate them from their environment, an environment that gives meaning to who they are. The process of objectifying renders the subject into a category that is knowable. Objectification "protects us from dangerous unanticipated turns that the world may take" (Jardine, 1998, p. 39). It also "protects" us from

understanding real people in real contexts. Now who is at risk? It is *us*, teachers, educators, who are at risk of *understanding* - at risk of knowing what our actions are doing to the youth who need us most. That knowledge might be painful and we should be protected from it! It also might disrupt the status quo, a situation from which *we* benefit.

As has been earlier noted (Taylor, Shultz, & Wishart Leard, 2005) the neoliberal ideas that guided the restructuring of the Alberta government beginning in the early 1990s are evident in initiatives to address the needs of youth "at-risk." As the Alberta Government Annual Report (Alberta Education, 1999) states, "an excellent education system is an excellent investment in our future" (p. 18). This approach reflects a rationale of attempting to raise high school completion rates as a necessary goal in the face of global competition. Alberta Learning's, "Removing Barriers to High School Completion" (2001) report notes their Business Plan has set a target for improving high school completion as a necessary contribution toward creating conditions for investing in Alberta.

An appreciation of the larger economic context in Alberta suggests the basis for our understandings of "at-risk" arise out of an *economy* that is at risk of not being well prepared to compete globally. Students who fail to complete high school also fail to contribute to the economy and ultimately to creating an Alberta that is attractive to international investment. And so they become an abstraction, a missing piece of our global competitiveness. Yet this integral component of global competitiveness is not the focus in relation to *students* who fail to complete. It is the student's own lack. Attention is paid to their "specific behavioral, emotional, or educational 'problems' and, thus, there is a strong inclination to divert attention from the inadequacies of the educational institution

itself and what bureaucratic, cultural, and economic conditions caused the necessity of applying these constructs originally" (Apple, 2004c, p. 128). The need to compete globally is uncritically adopted as necessary as is the place of disenfranchised youth within it. The educational institution itself becomes a cog in the wheel. While we often witness tensions "between *social justice* and *social control* discourses" (Wishart Leard, Taylor, & Shultz, 2005, p.3) in Alberta Learning documents we also see the ways in which documents such as these *produce* youth "at-risk" by constructing them as problems.

ICHS in the Institutional Context

ICHS senior teachers see how teacher preparation programs do their part to train teachers who will be ready to impart the competitive global spirit into their students.

> *[New] teachers don't know how to respond to the students [at ICHS] and they respond in ways often that are not helpful... teachers are trained to be in charge and to be bosses. Unfortunately most of these students that we have, had too much of that... it drives them out the door. And other times teachers will want to get into well, "You didn't complete the assignment, I'm sorry, you fail." That's standard practice because how can you do otherwise when you have a class of 30 or 35 students, you're moving through the curriculum and you have to meet the demands of all those parents and the administration and you have to get through the course. That's the training that they bring with them here and responding in a different way seems less than professional to them. (ICHS Teacher)*

New teachers coming out of teacher training programs view as necessary a particular approach to teaching. Being in charge, a banking style of teaching, allows for rapid movement through the curriculum. When classroom activity does not unfold, as they believe it should, they express frustration.

> *I'm still struggling with this, like Science 10 where they come and they come back and they go and they come back and I get pissed off because we don't have any of their stuff and they expect you to drop what [you] are doing and go, like (student's name), it's driving me wild right now. So that's a transition cause usually in all the schools I've been at, even through teaching, [the process is] there's the papers, find it, get somebody to help you. (ICHS Teacher)*

This teacher is referring to the inconsistent attendance patterns that are common to this population of youth.

As a teacher, I too was often frustrated when students reappeared without the course materials I had already provided. I recall one student in particular who regularly told me he had spilled coffee on his papers and wanted me to make new copies for him. I wondered why he didn't just quit drinking coffee if it was causing such a problem! But the problem is not that. The problem is if you have no regular home or someone regularly expressing an interest in your schooling, keeping track of your *school things* is not a big priority. On some level new teachers understand this.

> *If you had a kid who from kindergarten to grade nine has had nobody say to them, you know, you are smart, you can do this, keep trying, you will get it. They're not getting it from home; they're not hearing that from their mom and dad. They need some sort of reward system. (ICHS Teacher)*

The understanding, however, is that these students are lacking the "skills" needed to function in an academic setting. By implementing a reward system we as teachers can help them overcome this lack. We can bring them up to the *appropriate* standards expected in a school. Like learning to take responsibility for your things. It is interesting to note that "things" (material), and looking after them, are important in schools and that we have come to view special needs students as "things" (objects), also needing to be managed. Students, like pencils, come to be seen as a cog in our materially based, at-risk economy.

Where is the awareness of the assumptions being made about the institutional focus on the necessity of values such as "looking after one's things" or on the institutional assumptions regarding lack? We know that these youth do not fit the profile of what is *normal* in schools. That is why they are coded as "42s," severe emotional and behavioral disabilities. However, the school is the only institution to label these students as such, "primarily because of the prevailing assumptions of normality" held by school personnel (Apple, 2004c, p. 130). These assumptions and the associated language have a productive purpose within schools. Clinical language such as "severe emotional and behavioral disability" is a label that confers "scientific" status on the process of "helping." The language system of the helping professions is used to "justify and marshal public support for professional practices" that "actually serves the existing distribution of power in institutions and society" (p. 135).

After a recent conference presentation on the difficulties the process of coding poses for schools such as ICHS, a woman who had been in the audience approached me to discuss her concerns with the information being collected in the interests of diagnosing

special needs students. She identified herself as a lawyer who had done some work with the Alberta Government Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP). She asserted a concern that the government was asking for too much information. More than they need, which is in violation of the spirit of the Act. Why *does* the government need to know how many times the students in my class swear in an hour? Why *is* this considered evidence of emotional and behavioral disabilities? It seems to me to be more of a learned behavior, not a disability.

The "neutral" language of coding, disabilities, and special needs "rests upon highly speculative data and may be applied without actually being appropriate" (Apple, 2004c, p. 136). Is it appropriate to count swear words (and other behaviors) and use this information uncritically to assess a person's mental wellbeing without understanding environmental circumstances? And then use this assessment to control behavior? This instance, a chance conversation at a conference, opens possibilities for understanding that weren't there before. An assumption is broken open. Just because the government asks for and collects information doesn't mean it is *necessary* information or even that it is being used. This experience challenges my beliefs and points to my complicity in a system of "experts" who have the *right* answers. What are the right answers and what are the right questions? How did the questions get to be about behaviors? What has been said about special needs in the past needs to be "readable again by reopening it to new, generative instances" (Jardine, 1998, p. 41), like the pedagogical instance of ICHS.

By focusing simply on *behaviors* educators can conveniently label students in ways that are acceptable within the institution of schooling and in the wider community. While government authorities may not be using all the data collected in the interests of

coding young people, the act of collecting by teachers affects consciousness in ways that shape teachers' understandings of youth and ultimately their teaching behaviors. We have come to accept the *expert* opinion uncritically with little understanding of underlying political aims or ethical consequences. We believe we are helping or, at least, those special needs students are *being* helped. It allows us to feel good. Something is being done for/about those poor unfortunate souls. But in the process students are being stereotyped in ways that allow us to deal with the stereotype instead of the individual. Apple (2004c) explains the process of maintaining this illusion. Conditions by which we come to view experts as essential are ideological. Expert knowledge provides working definitions of a complex situation. As well, the perspectives of experts reflect dominant values of society. What we are being told is congruent with what we already understand. The behaviors of disenfranchised urban youth must be pathological because they are inconsistent with the behaviors of the youth we know, youth from the dominant classes. Apple argues that the use of "officially collected statistics based on these officially defined categories" needs to be interrogated with an understanding of "what ideological assumptions underpin the constructs within which the data was generated" (p. 140). In this case, we need to consider an understanding of the assumptions that define emotional and behavioral disabilities in schools.

Struggles to De-code

Students at ICHS have endured many years of public schooling that labeled them in various ways. As was evident in the previous chapter on subjectivities informed by schooling, these youth know the ways in which teachers and peers understand them and

are significantly affected by that knowledge. Whether or not the labels are formally applied is inconsequential in relation to shaping students' understandings of themselves. As was earlier noted, the process of coding is a process of objectifying youth. Given that new teachers to the school are playing an active role in coding behaviors as pathological, in what ways do school practices attempt to reshape these teachers' understandings of disenfranchised youth as active subjects? In what ways might an interpretive look at teachers' understandings illuminate possibilities for reshaping objects into subjects? How have their understandings changed my understandings?

Senior staff members at ICHS tend to fault teacher preparation programs as not adequately preparing teachers for a context that necessitates meeting the needs of disenfranchised urban youth. The reality, however, is that this student population has specialized needs that require new understandings of teachers. A senior teacher reflects this impression.

> *It's good for us because we get young teachers, first year or so because they're not totally set in their ways, somewhat malleable, and we can work with them easier. (ICHS Teacher)*

But working with new teachers to reshape impressions and judgments is a long process and often teachers don't have the commitment necessary to see it through. While many of their staff team comprehend the difficulties inherent in the lives of ICHS students and are keen to contribute to their education, some teachers are there simply because they can't get *better* jobs in the public system.

> *I think a lot of the times it's people looking for a job because they have to pay the rent or pay the mortgage and that's usually when it's difficult for us. I think what*

we should be doing is paying people above grid and we should have teachers who are here because they're interested in the kind of challenges that are here. (ICHS Teacher)

Teachers whose minds aren't open to new constructions of disenfranchised youth are certainly going to be more significantly influenced by the messages of the coding process than the counter messages being presented in staff meetings and general school philosophies.

Weekly staff meetings are conducted using an action research format where all staff members are actively involved in discussing common problems and fostering solutions. One frequent example is that of the "stories" many youth present that are a reflection of the manipulation tools, such as getting away with things and being tough, that they have learned for survival.

We have weekly staff meetings where we discuss each student in the school. And then each staff member has input into that discussion. The threads of manipulation are exposed in that process. (ICHS Teacher)

This teacher is specifically addressing the problem of manipulation but the staff meeting serves other purposes as well. It provides a forum to reflect on teaching practice, solicit input on solving problems in the classroom, a platform for working toward collective responses to school wide concerns, and a supportive environment to share the burdens of listening to and dealing with students' painful experiences on an ongoing basis. But new staff impressions of these meetings don't conform.

I tune out sometimes. I do get frustrated cause I wanna get done and I tend to be that way in general... I find myself organized but I'm also quite social so it

doesn't bother me, at the start of the year it bothered me when we were here until five o'clock. (ICHS Teacher)

That looks like total incongruence to me. This teacher's comprehension is of a meeting that is disorganized and dragging on far too long. As a teacher, I sat through many of these meetings and they can certainly appear to be simply rambling conversation. But I also share an appreciation of the concept of action research and know such a process would be severely undermined by tight adherence to a timed agenda. While these teachers are slowly coming to understand the student population through this process, they are not understanding, the importance of the process itself.

How did I come to understand the process as relevant? It was by being told it was action research that I came to recognize it as such. It wasn't that the process was unrecognizable as action research. I just hadn't thought of it that way. So new teachers don't either grasp or embrace the value of staff meetings. Is it that the potential benefits haven't been adequately impressed upon them or is it that they reject these understandings?

It's difficult working with new teachers because they know their job or they wouldn't have their degree. (ICHS Teacher)

This senior teacher senses some resistance. He goes on to express that if these teachers had been exposed to the possibility of and differences in this type of population within their university program they would not be so resistant to new understandings when they enter an unfamiliar environment. A youth worker concurs with this impression of new teachers.

The problems with the teachers, if the staff working as a team and we're all sort

of on the same level and we're used to doing the same things, when somebody new comes in there's sort of adjustments and misunderstandings and I find it complicates it, makes it hard for the whole team that's operating. (ICHS Youth Worker)

What he's saying is that teachers understand their role differently from what is expected of them in this school. Here they are expected to be part of a team that includes youth workers. Everyone works toward a common goal. The teacher's subjectivity now needs to be shaped by more than just their solitary status inside the classroom. It seems that early service teachers are not developing an appreciation of the structural differences of school operations or their changed role within these structures. How am I implicated in this meaning making? Is it because I needed to have school operations explained to me? What is different about this school for *them*? That would have been a good research question, but Gadamer (1989) tells us that the interpretation is "a dimension of meaning that is intelligible in itself and as such offers no reason for going back to the subjectivity of the author" (p. 292). Okay, so I'm on my own here. Do early service teachers find value in school practices, or do they just believe the school and its inhabitants need to be fixed? New teachers do seem to be more conscious of the specialized needs of the learners in this school.

Summary

The tensions of pedagogy illuminated in this chapter provide insight into the dissonance between understandings of the realities of street life for young people and understandings of these same youth in public schools. These schools, set within a larger

governmental framework of labeling youth, have contributed to the subjective understandings of these students who eventually left the public school system prior to high school completion. Labels serve a productive purpose in schools by hiding the interrelations between people and allowing educators to view students as abstractions. By placing students into categories, unquestioningly assumed to be neutral, we avoid seeing the student as a person and fail to understand our own positioning within relations. Our power to impose these constructs on others remains unexamined.

Examination of the labels used in schools demands an awareness of historical dimensions in schools and social conditions throughout Canada's history. An "at-risk" discourse grows out of particular beliefs related to involvement in mainstream society and is defined by those who occupy positions at its center. The language of "at-risk" also masks inequalities based on class, "race," gender, sexual orientation, and regional differences. Labeling those "at-risk" allows educators to leave unexamined situations of racism, sexism and other biases. It also leaves unexamined the questions of who is *really* at risk – the school or the child.

Within Alberta, labeling of those who are "at-risk" falls within an institutional framework that identifies students with special learning needs and provides funding designed to accommodate those needs in schools. Once a child can be identified as having special needs, general treatments can be prescribed that are assumed to be both neutral and helpful. Average treatments reduce the complexity involved with having to *deal* with large numbers of students. Unfortunately the rigorous application process required to access special needs funding can quickly become unwieldy for schools such as ICHS that have large numbers of special needs students. Due to environmental

circumstances many of these students are placed into a category of emotional/behavioral disabilities and given a coding consistent with a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Antisocial Personality Disorder. These abstract categories arise out of an institutional context that views middle class behaviors as the norm. These youth in this context shed light on an understanding that reveals difference, by way of street involvement, as disability.

The institution of public schooling, including teacher preparation programs, resides within an economic context informed by a scientific discourse. This discourse neglects understanding of the specific instance in favor of developing ways to control, predict, and manipulate the future. Objectification protects us from unpredictability. It also protects us from understanding the implications of our actions on the students in our classrooms. We are not only protected from knowing but also enabled to feel good about our role in *helping*.

Chapter 7: Coming to Understand School Practices

> Those strands of critical and feminist pedagogy discourse which have emphasized the social vision are struggling in a "fruitful" direction. But their constructions of "new" "pedagogies" do not alter the regime of pedagogy. Here I find support for my claim that pedagogy as the process of knowledge production requires attention to both the social visions and their related instructional practices. The social vision is insufficient. Any regime of truth is enacted or functions only through specific practices (Gore, 1993, p. 145).

Introduction

How does a school that is trying to disrupt the dominant constructions of disenfranchised urban youth work with these realities and move both teachers and students toward new understandings? At ICHS, staff built a program based on students' expressed needs and continuously mold and shape elements of practice to meet ongoing and changing exigencies. This chapter explores the idea that in this inner city environment it is necessary to create conditions for pedagogy through initial engagement with youth. Instructional practices are an ongoing process of pursuing an emanicpatory vision through careful attention to the needs of disenfranchised youth. Specific practices are designed to be welcoming and accepting while fostering a sense of belonging. Relationships are crucial in contributing to an environment where critical pedagogy can be engaged. Ultimately teachers hope to foster a deep understanding of experiences embedded in a larger social context through commitment to critical practice.

Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy

Senior staff members outline a process of working toward building the conditions for pedagogy. Ideally, early communications between teachers, youth workers, and students need to be limited to frequent affirmative interactions.

> *I think that when they come in and there's a lot of support staff and they develop unique rapports with all of us. And then come to expect it when they come in the door. And it's that familiarity. I think it helps a lot, keeps them coming back... to see the same person, the same place, it just feels comfortable, I think that's a motivating factor in attendance. (ICHS Teacher)*

It is essential that youth understand that they are *accepted* at ICHS, and I don't mean formally admitted. I mean that students need to know that it is okay to be who they are and that they are welcome in this place. As one youth worker points out,

> *The school welcomes people and I've heard students say that all the other schools had kicked me out except this one. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

While it sounds like students are just at ICHS by default, this awareness is in fact an important point. In many cases, no one else would take them. They need to know that ICHS *will* take them and that it is a place that is warm and provides hot coffee and lunches. This is a crucial first step to moving youth from the streets into formal education.

Literature supports the belief that school programs for disenfranchised urban youth work best when students feel safe, accepted, and cared for (Alberta Learning, 2001; O'Dowd, 1993). My experience as a teacher supports these thoughts as well. At first, the program appeared to me to be lacking structure. It was messy, lacking formalities. Class changes were inefficient, noisy affairs. It begged improvement. However, knowing that

those structures would constitute a problem for youth who live lives characterized by lack of structure focuses attention on the importance of *lack* of structure. It is relationships that are important, not the presence of structure.

When I asked the senior staff group about first impressions and what youth would immediately notice of the environment in the school, many mentioned the sharing circles. A teacher explains a process beginning with everyone sitting on the floor in the gym.

> *We have circle three times a day. Basically it's to air problems, concerns, periodically it becomes more administrative based and so we're taking attendance. But a lot of times it'll be a student takes attendance. A student facilitates the circle and it's done on a weekly basis and so each week in theory gets a different student and they take responsibility for the classes starting, the circle starting, and people going to class. And everyone has an equal voice in the circle. (ICHS Teacher)*

An education that is effective for all students strives for equal participation of disenfranchised voices and legitimizing experiences in schools. Again, it is relationships and the focus on equality inherent in them that is important. The structure of the circle fosters a particular type of relationship between students and those in positions of greater authority. While recognizing there is an implicit hierarchy of power relations within the explicit rules of the circle it can be noted that teachers look for certain behaviors or signs but "the signs have meaning only to the teacher" (Bernstein, 2004, p. 200). That is while the students have voice it is tempered by the power teachers hold to evaluate what students are saying. However, where the youth in this study felt they were silenced in public schools, a voice in circle is an important component of inclusion and a sense of

belonging in this school. When students feel they have a voice they have power, an opportunity to contribute their knowledge and to change their realities.

Programs that recognize knowledge as power are more effective for youth who have traditionally had their voices marginalized in schools (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000). So how effective is the circle as a space for sharing power in the school? Students seem to appreciate and see the value in circles.

> *The circle... the students get a chance to voice their own opinion about how the school should be run or certain rules that should be done or not done. (ICHS Student)*

Virtually all students interviewed commented on the importance of being able to talk openly with staff and other students in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Troubling a non-judgmental approach.

As a teacher I too developed a perception that being non-judgmental was an important component of relationships with students. With time, however, I also came to believe that I needed to contribute some of myself to the relationship. If students are to feel truly valued in a relationship then sharing of voices needs to be involved. When students share of themselves and we respond appropriately we are only getting at one aspect of building a relationship. At first I felt that sharing my middle class life with them was inappropriate but as I have earlier noted, a belief that my life is something to aspire to is ethnocentric so why not share my experiences with them? My students seemed to enjoy giving me, the middle-aged mom, advice on which rock concerts I should and should not let my twelve-year-old son attend, what type of discman is best for a child,

and even how to avoid having my car broken into in the parking lot! While these topics may sound trivial and even inappropriate they are an opportunity for youth to share what they have to offer. I felt that I was being given a nod of approval when the youth who is expert at stealing cars shared his knowledge with me. Maybe his knowledge was validated in that instance. Maybe I was also validated *by him*, as being worthy of receiving that knowledge. Certainly validating his knowledge related to illegal activity raises other troubling questions, but as teachers we cannot effectively shape behaviors without first establishing relationships with youth. A critical pedagogy approach allows these types of questions to emerge through personal experience leading to dialogue around issues that steer a young person into such activities. It is through analysis that youth come to understand ways in which their behaviors reflect unfair structures in society as well as perpetuate their place in the larger community. Change comes about through their involvement in a dialectic process of reflection and action.

New teachers understand as well the importance of providing students with an opportunity to talk openly as reflected in these thoughts about a student.

> *She just really craves the time to talk about anything. When she got kinda a feel that she could pretty much say whatever cause I don't care like I'm pretty open... then when (we) started walking places for phys-ed she'd start tellin' me all this stuff and I think that's probably why she comes, just to get some time with somebody that doesn't judge. (ICHS Teacher)*

The meaning implicit in these teacher's words reveals an important insight into the needs of ICHS students. Knowing that this youth *needs* to talk about her life without prejudgment by teachers is somewhat incongruent with an understanding of early service

teachers who have been shaped primarily by pre-service teacher training reinforced by the requirements of coding and assessment. Teachers are required to assess students' work and assign failing grades to those who don't meet the standard. How did this teacher come to an awareness that these students needed something different? Were her perceptions shaped primarily through staff meetings and other discussions or also by her experiences in the classroom?

This challenges my earlier understanding that teachers who aren't introduced to these ideas at university are resistant to new learning. Something new is revealed here. Are there tensions present for *them*? Does knowing that these youth require individualized care and attention create tensions with what they know to be effective pedagogy in schools? It seems likely that they need additional time to bring their pedagogical practices in line with student needs. I wonder if they enjoyed better pay, job security, benefits, and satisfactory working conditions (defined as the absence of fluctuating room temperatures, poor lighting, building that isn't clean, mouse traps) they would stick around long enough to begin to absorb the practices promoted by more senior staff. This same early service teacher seems to indicate that job security would make a difference in her commitment to the school.

> *The staff here rotates quite frequently. I don't know if that's due to the situation or the unstableness... and that's the thing, it's not the job that I wouldn't come back to, it's the unstableness of whether next year there's going to be a whole year. And if I got offered a full-time stable job then it would be like now I have something that I can count on. (ICHS Teacher)*

I think about my own development as a teacher in this environment. Some of my understandings came from learning to listen and be guided by more experienced staff, especially those who had lived through similar difficult circumstances as youth. But a great deal of my pedagogy came from being actively engaged as a graduate student while I was a teacher. External, formal learning would be an important component of teaching in this circumstance, complimented by structured opportunities to reflect on personal practice. In-service training is recognized as important to teaching in general but in this case does it need to be more extensive? Should concepts such as critical pedagogy, popular theater, action research, poverty and education, and sociological understandings of "race" and gender, be taught formally through ongoing teacher education? And if so, who's going to pay for it? While informal learning in this program is invaluable to teacher development, formal learning validates and informs for new teachers, the practices present in the school.

Fostering a sense of belonging.

I have noted that early relations with youth need to focus on ensuring a safe and welcoming environment while beginning to build respectful relationships. Slowly, as these relationships are extended and deepened youth come to see the school as a place where they belong. They begin to take ownership of the school. For some it is like a home. On a recent visit to the school I spoke with a teacher who, quite excitedly, talked about a group of students who had been in the school for about half a year. I knew some of them from my literacy class when they first arrived last winter. Their attendance was sporadic and engagement in class work was difficult. Most were coming off heavy drug

use and had recent contact with the law. This school was, like other schools, worthy of resistance. Over the summer they came regularly to outreach, a recreational program at the school. Academic classes were not being offered but they were still coming. Once September rolled around one of the youth was reported to be wandering about the group home in the morning telling his friends to get up to go to school. Somehow ownership had evolved. Now, attendance is quite regular and a sense of commitment seems to have formed. A senior teacher explains.

> *For most of the youth, their lives are so unstable that the school represents one of the stable factors in their lives and in many cases the only stable factor in their lives. It's a safe place that they can come to and to escape a harsh environment. In the process, the shift that has to take place because we do our best to build community here and many times students come to see the community almost as a family and to replace the sense of family that they don't actually have in their own lives. (ICHS Teacher)*

When this teacher refers to "the shift that has to take place" he is meaning that there needs to be a movement from initial relations that focus on positive interactions and bringing youth to feel comfortable in the school to more in depth relationships whereby students start to see themselves as active members of the school community.

There is a tension inherent here though that complicates this process. It is difficult to focus on positive exchanges when initial relations are also important for noting behaviors that are useful in coding and conducting intake assessments with students. While one senior teacher noted "we try to keep the process respectful" an understanding of relationships that is contradictory to that outlined above is highlighted. A relationship

built on sharing and respect cannot include "coding." Or can it? Maybe it's not so different from a teacher-student relationship that involves marking and assessment. But relationships in *this* school are intended to be different. Senior staff members reflect on the ways in which these relations are enhanced.

> *It's all built on trust. They have to learn to trust you first. So it's I guess you could say just witty bantering at first. Just small conversations here and there, probing with the right questions and then eventually they find I'm more of a friend. They know they can talk to me about anything, but it takes time you know, there's something I have to work on with them is gaining their trust. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

A senior teacher elaborates.

> *There's still problems because, cooperation and respect, it's a process and they're all going through it... And I think sometimes we have to keep reminding ourselves that we need to go through it as well. (ICHS Teacher)*

Like all relationships, these too take effort but the effort is often intense and rewards are often not immediately apparent.

As O'Dowd (1993) explains, many of these students have received very little trust and love and may need more time to develop positive relationships. Sometimes you have to take some abuse before cracking the shell and that can be difficult for teachers and youth workers. Again, the importance of understanding the population would increase the desire to keep working at building difficult relationships. The reward comes later as you begin to see students developing a sense of belonging and an increased self-esteem.

A number of the students interviewed talked about the social structure of the school as an important component contributing to a positive environment.

> *It's more the people here, they act really comfortable here, I know everybody's name, everybody knows my name and we can all say hi to each other and the teachers, I like the fact that... call them by their first name and talk to them about whatever... like it's been good for me like self-esteem wise and everything like that because I don't think anybody really hates... everybody just tries to respect each other and it's all about like um... good people here. (ICHS Student)*

Once they have discovered that this school is a place where they can belong and where they want to belong, many will stand up for it when they feel it is threatened.

> *She has a loyalty to the school, a lot of students here are like that, like they say, "I don't care what anyone thinks. If something's going wrong, I'm going to tell somebody because I don't want it to take place in my school." (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Successful programs for students who have left mainstream schools are ones to which students have some sense of ownership (O'Dowd, 1993) such as the type that is fostered at ICHS. I wonder if these students feel ownership of their school as a place where they belong because they are validated or do they understand it as a place where youth like *them* who are "at-risk," coded, or special needs are validated?

As a teacher I observed ownership behavior as well. One day in circle a student urgently expressed a desire to discuss a concern that she had. Somehow circle ended without the concern being addressed. She pressed the issue further and circle was reconvened. She complained that another student had been seen doing "jib" in the girl's

washroom. She accused the teachers of ignoring the problem and was quite sure we were all aware that it was going on. I sat very quietly hoping I wouldn't have to admit that I didn't even know what jib was! I later found out that it is "speed" in the language of my day and you would know someone is using it by the conditions of their eyes. The eyes dart around continuously. The problem with this behavior from the perspective of a student is that it puts the school in jeopardy.

The school is funded by a variety of sources both public and community. Representatives of funding bodies would not appreciate funding a school for current drug users and students do not want behaviors such as this to put this funding at risk. If the school were to close, many of these youth would have difficulty finding other places in which to complete their schooling. As a senior teacher points out,

> *Many of them [students] see this as their last chance to get an education. I think most of the students who come to the school sincerely would want to get an education, want to complete high school, but the realities of their early socialization and day to day environment make it challenging to say the least. (ICHS Teacher)*

These are youth who see the value in a high school diploma and understand education to be an important component of future successes. Many see ICHS as the only possible avenue to achieve that goal, a contributing factor in their ownership of the school.

Encouraging "success."

A simultaneous component of a sense of belonging is a series of "steps" moving toward academic definitions of success. The eventual goal is high school completion and

an academic diploma. Some students struggle through these academic stream courses and have the option of completing a general degree, but ultimately this is a high school program that aspires to have students achieve the formal education needed for access to workplace and further education options as part of an ongoing process.

> *It is a long-term process. And that's one of the things that makes us different [as a school]. It's a long-term program. We have programs intended to bring people in off the streets, move them from the streets into the school, or into youth support program, from the youth support program into Inner City High School, from Inner City High School to writing departmental exams and encouraging them to look at post-secondary. And they're all different steps and it's a long route. (ICHS Teacher)*

This process takes many years with most students venturing into it quite slowly. As mentioned earlier many students stop and start a number of times before completing the initial literacy courses. Once they develop a routine of coming to school regularly there is still a long term commitment needed to reach high school completion as many need additional courses to fill in gaps in academic skills.

Initially "success" is defined in a variety of academic and non-academic ways, as reflected in these comments by teachers and youth workers at the school.

> *For some students just coming to school on a regular basis is success. And we let them know that as well. Coming to school on time is success. Not fighting in school.. success. You know even if they just come here for one or two terms and then have a different way of looking at the world, are able to cooperate with each*

other, that's success. And then they move onto other programs and that's just fine. And that happens as well. (ICHS Teacher)

Literature on redefining measures of success for disenfranchised urban youth is lacking. Alberta Learning (2001) hints at an understanding by acknowledging the importance of listening to and supporting disenfranchised students who are dealing with complex problems in their lives. However, they do not take that further to recognize the importance of greater flexibility in areas such as attendance and coming to school on time, or providing additional funding to schools such as ICHS who teach such students. Success is ultimately measured as high school completion and results on diploma exams. Success is a concept that is *familiar* to us. We live in a society defined by success as measured by academic achievement, status through employment and the accumulation of material things. People who have these *things* are considered successful. Current accountability discourse in education focuses on these measures of success, moving us farther away from an examination of process as a way to gauge the progress of disenfranchised youth.

I have occasionally been involved in academic discussions regarding *alternate* definitions of success but these tend not to be focused on making concrete changes in schools. While a school such as ICHS is built on and understands different ways of looking at success, how do ICHS *students* define success? Would they see themselves as successful when they are able to get themselves to school on time or are they a product of a society that defines success in ways not readily accessible to them? Certainly the intent of senior staff is to challenge and reshape students' perceptions but what of a coding process that says something different in terms of success? If success is defined by the

requirements of special needs funding as the absence of swearing, and an accurate portrayal of street life in drama, or writing, or video requires swearing, tensions are revealed. Certainly we need to initially validate students' lived experiences before beginning to challenge and understand the norms of middle class behavior.

The staff focus group offered additional conceptions of measures of success in their discussions of the drama program.

> *I think just participating... being there, talking, adding to something. Doing a game when you haven't done it before. You can choose to participate... and for some to just do "what are you doing" or something like that, which is where you're actually put on the spot. (ICHS Teacher)*
>
> *Measures of success can be really small. (ICHS Teacher)*

These small, incremental degrees of success happen in drama and in literacy programs in conjunction with becoming part of the school community. Drama can be incorporated in a variety of ways as a component of critical literacy pedagogy. Popular theater has played an integral role throughout the history of ICHS initially as a practice out of which the school itself evolved. After using popular theater to understand social issues that had blocked their development youth "saw the importance of education and its role in breaking the cycle of poverty and violence" (Dalgetty & Cloutier, 2000, p. 42). After an unsuccessful return to public high schools some of the youth suggested starting a school.

Popular Theater and Media Practices

At times popular theater is woven into programming, at other times it is limited to a drama group that meets independently within the school once per week. That is, not as a formal element of classroom content but as a group of interested participants that works toward a variety of performances often taking place at outside agencies or events. Early drama experiences focus on games and popular theater exercises to enhance student participation and feelings of comfort in the school.

> *We have a young guy who has been meeting in drama every week since last summer and I don't know if it was this week or the week before this... we did a game where you have to mime in the middle of the circle and he participated in it and it's the first time in a year. Most people arrive at that point a little sooner but [arriving at a point of comfort] is very personal. And he had other successes. He's actually been on a stage in front of an audience. But he actually put himself on that line [mime game] because someone else decides what you're going to do so you really have to trust the people you're playing with and you're very much not in control. And so to allow yourself not to be in control that way is... to give up the power. (ICHS Teacher)*

This comfort and trust is essential as a precursor to popular theater participation. While that sense of comfort and belonging is a vital component of feelings of community it also serves to bring youth to a point whereby they can participate as part of a popular theater group.

Boal (1985) draws attention to the need to become not only comfortable with participation but also to develop knowledge, control and expressiveness of one's body. In so doing, the participant "frees himself [sic] from his condition of spectator and takes on

that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject" (p. 126). Boal points out that initial contact with a group can be difficult stemming from the fact that the educator comes with the mission (in this Brazilian context) of eradicating illiteracy, which presupposes a coercive action. For this reason, the theatrical experience should begin with something familiar to the people, that is, the bodies of those who agree to participate. A focus on bodies leads Boal into a number of drama exercises designed to promote awareness of one's own body and ways to interpret and make expressive the portrayal of others.

In the ICHS situation students also arrive with feelings of apprehension toward educators who have traditionally played coercive roles in their lives. Youth's earlier experiences provide reason for creating conditions of community before proceeding to theater as dialogue about social conditions of participants. Dalgetty and Cloutier (2000) refer to a community of experience in relation to Inner City Drama, the precursor to ICHS. This is a community who have shared experiences of marginalization in schools but who have also shared experiences of being labeled in schools. Given that a critical pedagogy involves an examination of those experiences, the experience of being marginalized and labeled in schools offer possibilities for critical dialogue.

Prentki and Selman (2000) define popular theater as "a *process* of theater which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen" (p. 8). Popular theater is based on Paulo Freire's principles of education in that it embraces notions of participant ownership and exchange of ideas while engaging in reflection and action. Within it,

> A space is created where groups and individuals can afford to work on dangerous issues. They use the process to clarify their views, to investigate dilemmas, to analyze their social, political and economic situations, to challenge assumptions, to strategise, to 'rehearse for action', and to share their insights with others within and without their immediate community. (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p. 8).

The notion of "dangerous issues" is an interesting one. What is a dangerous issue? Is it one that could explode in your face? Probably, but that's part of a critical process. What's more important is limiting the danger for youth, only opening wounds within a process of healing. So how do we do that given that it needs to be done? Some might argue it is better to leave these issues alone. It would be more comfortable for youth in the short term to let sleeping dogs lie. But long term, sustained comfort requires an empowerment to act upon one's world.

Certainly the issues youth and staff members at ICHS are exploring through popular theater can be painful ones. Youth need to identify the topics and experiences they wish to explore and be actively involved in developing their own understandings and solutions to overcome these issues. Popular theater allows this to happen.

> *Since popular theater exercises are most often about social issues, then the kind of analysis that takes place is fairly significant as well. It often takes place just through presenting scenes without any kind of moralizing by the facilitators and it's the youth or students are able to draw what they're ready for from that process. (ICHS Teacher)*

The process referred to by this senior teacher is that defined by Paulo Freire as conscientisation, an awareness of reality coupled with a program of action, or praxis. Teachers, or facilitators, of this process recognize their role is not neutral as a member of the popular theater community. My own awareness of issues of importance to youth was

altered by involvement in popular theater exercises with them. They often identify police brutality as an issue and create a dramatic image that is very different from those we see in the media. Through popular theater I have seen real people as the victims of police brutality, not the nameless, faceless criminals who don't require us to examine both sides of the issue. Why does a young man need to have his face slammed into the side of his car in order to be arrested, when he is unarmed? Why does a young woman need to be ridiculed because she is drug addicted and homeless?

These issues are identified in literacy courses as well where comfort and trust also need to be precursors. Small measures and a variety of definitions of success can be seen in courses that are designed to foster academic success quickly.

> *A lot of the kids that have come here haven't experienced any kind of success, be it through a job or anything. I've heard stories where people have been stuck working in bottle depots counting bottles, and that's where they saw themselves, as just being there. Then they come here and they complete two or three credits and they're beaming. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

It isn't just the completion of courses that fosters success but also the arts based focus within these courses.

> *The digital media... I think the number one success for sure is the confidence in one's abilities that they get from producing artwork so rapidly and it's so visible. But there's also I think an incidental learning almost where they learn a variety of computer skills and they become familiar with various applications and they can generalize to other digital media applications more readily. (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Photography is also prominent in these courses. Boal (1985) tells us the means of production needs to be transferred to the people. In relation to photography, this means giving students a camera and sending them out to photograph their world. Photography then becomes a language, a way to answer questions about one's life. Boal suggests very simple questions such as "where do you live" can lead to very powerful images and themes that are developed by the group together.

> *I think they learn a lot about their own environment, their own social situation and I think they learn a lot about choices to make to overcome some of those issues that they're previously maybe overcome by. (ICHS Teacher)*

As students develop an awareness of their environment they begin to be ready to move to higher-level courses and more academic definitions of success. The intent, although not always realized, is to continue a critical literacy throughout their school experience thereby broadening and deepening their power to act within their social worlds.

Consciousness then generates discussion of the "choices" youth have made, often leading to involvement with the law, and the choices that are there for them to make once they have the understanding and confidence needed in order to exercise them. When youth first arrive at the school many have an appreciation of some of their own behaviors as "bad" choices and have informed subjectivities based on these choices. Conscientization fosters awareness of the social world that, while pushing them in directions conducive to making "bad" decisions, develops a praxis that leads to better choices for them personally and for acting upon their environment. The character of "Slash", written by Jeanette Armstrong (1988), embodies this course of action. Difficulties growing up in a traditional home in an Aboriginal community on a Reserve

while attending a predominantly White school in town, where he experienced racial taunts and social exclusion left him confused about his place in the world and angry with White people and structures of mainstream government. Armstrong paints a haunting portrait of the frustrations, sense of inadequacy, and hopelessness felt by many Aboriginal youth who share similar life circumstances and experiences.

For readers, Slash's pain can be felt but as readers we are also brought to an awareness of how Slash makes things worse for himself and his people by following blindly down the path he is led. While recognizing the barriers to participation in schooling and jobs that were faced by Slash, he comes to realize that he does have choices other than involvement in the violence of the drug trade.

> It felt good to be with just Indians, young ones, who were seriously attacking a problem only they seemed to understand. One which I understood better and better. I finally understand why I had deserved to be punished for working in the dope business. The Johnny Johns and the people who helped them just helped our people into the gutter. (Armstrong, 1988, p. 77)

This wisdom is prevalent in staff members' understandings at ICHS as well, as one of the youth workers explains.

> *Life is filled with choices. It's like, you're the writer, you write it. It's not written out for you and you have to follow the script to a T. You write it. You're the writer of your own life. And you decide which way you want it to go. I tell them this all the time. Some of them still don't believe me and they think, "I'm scum, I'm going to stay scum, I was born scum and I'm going to die scum." (ICHS Youth Worker)*

Making decisions to effect changes in one's life is wrought with difficulties when so many barriers need to be overcome including these youths' beliefs that reinforce the existing social order through what Gramsci would identify as voluntary consent (Morrow

& Torres, 1995). Confidence comes from the power to act and change one's surroundings. Unfortunately this self-perception is difficult to advance in an environment of coding behaviors in a way that reinforces a subjectivity of "scum." So how can this tension be engaged in order to overcome the difficulties it creates for schools such as ICHS?

How have I made choices informed by the power to act? Where does that power come from and how did I know when I had it? How many "bad" choices did I make before coming to understand I had the power to make "good" choices? For me, it seems it is tied into having the self-confidence to say "no" to things I didn't want to do but went along with because that's what the group was doing. Growing up with emotional abuse quickly strips away positive feelings of self worth and associated power to take risks and make informed decisions. Growing up with an alcoholic parent also means seeing excessive drinking as "normal" and therefore not a "bad" choice. How will students know when they have that power to act? Is it partly dependent on developing a sense of what a "good" choice is? Will they have the confidence and desire to use their power? Will they need to resist what they know and are comfortable with in order to effect change? Do new understandings implicate people they care about? For example, if drug use is deemed to be a "bad" thing, how do youth reconcile a parent's drug use? Are we addressing the problem of conflicting messages between home and school? I learn from my experiences at ICHS that I make choices to write my own life with them. I currently consider whether I am using my power to act to facilitate change in Edmonton's inner city or am I just hiding away at the university writing about it because it is more comfortable. While

writing helps me clarify the power that I hold, what I do with that power to affect change in the future will require a commitment to choices that transfer that power.

Critical Literacy and Deeper Understanding of Experiences

It seems that ultimately we have to move students toward a critical literacy that requires a level of analysis that is based on a critical evaluation of their experiences. This includes their experiences of being labeled and how those judgments made about them, by teachers and other authority figures, informs their subjectivities. In what ways is a critical approach incorporated into higher-level academic courses? Ira Shor provides a definition of critical literacy.

> We are what we say and do. The ways we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through speech and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us. We can remake ourselves and society, if we choose, through alternative words and dissident projects. This is where critical literacy begins – words that question a world not yet finished or humane. (Shor, 1999, p. 1).

As we can see though, simply "choosing" alternative words and dissonant projects is not as straightforward as it might seem. Critical teaching is situated "within circumstances of 'normal' educational practice" (Knoblauch, 1993, p. 75). How do we find time in the classroom to work with issues deeply while meeting the demands of a rigorous curriculum? My experience with teaching Social Studies 20 is that a multitude of resources exist that would expand the topics under discussion but I have to carefully "choose" which aspects of the curriculum I wish to enrich based on time limitations. How do I make those choices? Decisions are based on my own beliefs about what is important. Certainly I need to also recognize that I have the power to make those decisions.

We are reminded that instruction cannot be separated from the "politics of literacy" (Knoblauch, 1993, p. 75). The ideological conditions of which schooling is a part determine how literacy is "portrayed as a cultural value and how powerful groups define the means, ends, and measures of its attainment" (p. 75). So we are back to my student labeled through the coding process with literacy skills of "early elementary" yet holding knowledge and ability to use words such as "redemption" and "adversity." A label derived from a tool developed by those who have the power to define the measure and the outcomes and apply it to those who don't have power. Within this context, how do we make "choices" to remake ourselves, and society. Seems like a bit of an uphill battle.

I have earlier discussed ways ICHS teachers, and myself in particular, incorporate a variety of "themes" into literacy courses and how these themes are often derived through drama exercises. These themes provide an "in" to opening up a conversation with youth and a way to begin working on reading, writing, and analytical skills. As students become more comfortable in the school, enhance their literacy skills, and move toward higher-level courses, we need to begin to penetrate these texts with systems of thought that are concerned with the issues. Taking police brutality as an example of an issue, having students write about their experiences serves the purpose of establishing a topic they have an opinion about and can express themselves in relation to. Moving this topic into higher-level analysis means looking at the underlying issues of police brutality in the context of our lives. What are the historical relations between police and Aboriginal peoples in Canada? What is the history of youth justice in Canada?

The historicity of the issues can be used as a tool to cut through those "pedagogical practices that pen in rather than liberate consciousness" (Zandy, 2000, p. 147). Our commonsense understandings, promoted through schools, are of a proud tradition of Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This understanding extends to other police such as the Edmonton Police Service. They are the *good* "guys." If they are beating up on young people then the young people must be *bad* "guys." So we need to begin questioning these assumptions and historical understandings. This could prove to be a difficult task given the availability (or lack thereof) of literature that might paint an alternative picture. We want, however, to penetrate these texts with other ways of viewing the world, other perspectives on historical relations.

We begin to liberate consciousness by developing a historical sense of what has been and how that informs our understandings of the here and now. Differences in "treatment" by police need also to be looked at through a lens of gender, "race," social class, and sexual orientation. Issues to examine could include the recent disciplinary action taken against members of the Edmonton Police Service for circulating racist "jokes" that included slanderous comments about Aboriginal people. Do Aboriginal youth feel they would receive protection from police who harbor such feelings? How about gay and lesbian youth? Do these youth see police taking a stand against incidents of violence where gay or lesbian youth are victims? Zandy (2000) tells us we need to "illuminate relationality" and "life at the border of difference" (p.148). Students at ICHS occupy dislocated positions in relation to those who hold the power to define police actions. This fissure, or splitting away from the mainstream, provides a place from which youth can begin to question their relationship to the center, in this case the police. Why

do we unquestioningly obey laws that are not applied equally? Why do we allow discriminatory practices against those who occupy positions on the margins? How do abusive practices serve to prevent self-understandings in those who are abused? The story of disenfranchised urban youth, told in relation to mainstream policing practices, creates a disruption. It gives us a point of pause and a chance to reflect on commonsense understandings.

What texts might provide starting points for analyses of this issue? "Slash" by Jeanette Armstrong opens up questions of police brutality in relation to Aboriginal youth. Here Slash reflects on his experience in jail.

> Some of them pigs liked to call you dirty racist stuff and did stuff to make you mad. One of them did that to me first-off when I got there. It was during a line-up to go out in the yard. We had to pass through this screen gate, one at a time. This pig stood right beside it and roll called as we went through. When I came up, he stuck his foot out and would have tripped me but I was still strong enough to twist and catch my balance before his foot hooked me. His knee came up and caught me in the balls as he said, "Don't ever try and screw with me, Geronimo, or you'll understand what scalping means." (Armstrong, 1988, p. 65).

Issues of power and resistance play prominently in this passage. Given earlier discussions with ICHS youth regarding their own similar experiences with police, teachers can now move into an analysis of historical relations and how they continue to be played out in our prisons. How does this passage make students feel? How does this passage make teachers feel? Feelings of anger, frustration, and helplessness illuminate a disjunction between a public discourse of fairness and the realities of young people's lived experience.

In Canada we are progressive. We assume innocence until guilt is proven. So why have many ICHS students experienced police brutality while being arrested? I wouldn't expect that treatment from police so why do these youth expect it? Maybe because I am

White and middle class and they are disenfranchised through poverty, abuse, and skin color. They know they have no voice to complain about their treatment. It will just result in more abuse. In my case, I have power to complain if I am mistreated. I can mobilize resources including money, people in positions of power, and public opinion. If I were to be a victim of police brutality the public would be outraged, the media would have a field day. Does the power that I hold keep police from harassing me? I suspect they don't hold any animosity toward me anyway. Why would they? I don't break any laws. I'm a law-abiding citizen. I pay my taxes and contribute to the economy. Well, maybe not as a graduate student, but I *will* contribute to the economy!

A discussion such as this can heighten overt awareness of the issues at play within young people's experiences of police brutality. Layers can be added to the analysis by adding other texts. "Runaway, Diary of a Street kid" by Evelyn Lau is one such text. Here is Lau's experience with youth detention.

> We arrived at detention – a flat, solid brick building. The snickering cop assured me it would be just like a motel, except I'd be locked in. A swarm of flies attacked us in the hall before we entered another door, where a woman seated me in the admittance room and asked me a list of questions, mostly medical things. In another room they were having a debate about whether detention could legally hold me, but this question was cleared up when one policeman conveniently announced that I could be lying and they should keep me until my parents could be tracked down. (Lau, 1989, p. 67).

How does this passage make students feel? She was "snickered" at by the police. Not really the same thing as being "kicked in the balls." Lau is being treated as a runaway, a girl who is being naughty. She needs to be returned to her Chinese, middle class parents. She is not being taken seriously and is clearly frustrated throughout her time on the streets, by this aspect of her experience. Using this text in class, I find many ICHS students react similarly to her plight. They don't understand the "abuse" she claims at the

hands of her middle class parents who seem to simply want her to work hard and do well. It doesn't compare to their personal experiences of abuse. So are Lau's claims of abuse real? They resonated with me as I read her diary. I felt the loveless home, the unhappiness, and the strain of hiding in her bedroom hoping to not be noticed.

This text creates a space to add social class and other factors to the analysis. In what ways can "abuse" be experienced differently? How do we reconcile *degrees* of abuse? Is *any* level of abuse acceptable? What is the difference between a "runaway" and a youth who is "street involved?" Is a runaway simply a middle class youth who is being naughty while a youth who is street involved is disenfranchised, urban, poor, and breaking the law. How does the power of language work to name experiences in particular ways that benefit some and further marginalize others? Who holds this power? Bernstein (1977) explains that, "structural relationships, implicitly and explicitly, carry the power and control messages and shape, in part, the forms of response to them at the level of inter-action" (p. 155). Questions of power offer ways to disassemble knowledge and allow students' experiences to speak to them. But we can't just leave it at that. We also need to reassemble to build theories of political action. We need to move beyond binaries of social class, "race," and gender and raise central questions about the power to act. If we want to empower students to change police brutality "we have to see and teach its complexity" (Zandy, 2000, p. 155).

What examples are there of community action for social change that could be brought into the curriculum? S. Brown (2000) outlines a critical literacy relevant to engaging conflicts in his classroom on an Athabascan reserve. By teaching the conflicts between the Athabascan subculture and the dominant Euro-American culture, over

environmental issues, power relations were exposed. Brown believes that "providing a forum in the classroom for students to speak and write on such issues today increases the chances they will become spokespersons for their communities tomorrow" (p. 214). S. Brown emphasizes the importance of acquiring academic and critical literacy in order to enter the conversations that could affect social change. Without knowledge of the vocabulary used by those in positions of power it is difficult to enter the dialogue. Critical pedagogy is about the transference of power. It is about learning the language that allows you to claim the power to rename your world. It is about creating opportunities in the classroom for this to happen.

Summary

Teachers and youth workers at ICHS struggle to reshape youth from objects into subjects. Difficulties presented by the requirements of coding lead to influences on the shaping of new teachers, in particular, who come to this process with prior understandings built on earlier school and societal experiences reinforced by teacher preparation programs. Entrenchment of prior understandings has an impact on the teacher's openness to new understandings. Counter messages designed to offer a rereading of youths' experiences are apparent in staff meetings and general school practices. Early service teachers often resist these messages, believing school practices are lacking because they do not fit within established norms of how a school should operate. Over time these teachers develop an awareness of the personal needs of these youth but take much longer to come to an understanding of the importance of process in meeting these needs. Reflecting on my own path to awareness of school practices as a teacher in this context reveals some of my knowledge coming from formal learning as a

graduate student. Having the process explained to me by senior teachers was also helpful, but engagement over time was crucial. Relearning involves first becoming aware of what we do not know.

Practices within ICHS need to be reread as building the conditions for pedagogy. New knowledge needs to be constructed for beginning teachers that focuses on the importance of the process, leading to and including a critical pedagogy. Understanding of this process also reveals for us the tensions inherent in a critical pedagogy within larger educational practices of objectifying youth. Initially, relations between staff and new students at ICHS are highlighted by frequent positive interactions. Youth need to feel they are accepted, safe, and cared for in this place. Fostering positive relationships is an essential first step and is evidenced in practices such as the sharing circles that are incorporated into daily school lives. Validation of students' experiences as part of healthy relationships also requires a sharing on our part, a validation of our experiences by students.

Once these relationships come to be extended and deepened youth develop a sense of the school as a place to belong and begin to take ownership of it. They begin to see themselves as active members of the school community. This process is of course complicated by the need to code behaviors and conduct intake assessments. It is difficult to focus on positive exchanges while simultaneously noting "negative" behaviors. While ownership of the program is apparent in the actions of these youth it is unclear whether ownership is based on validation or based on ICHS being a place to belong for youth "like us." Many youth see ICHS as their only available path to formal education and certainly this is an important factor in taking ownership of a place that believes in them.

Popular theater is also a way in which community is fostered and youth can begin to forge links with others who share similar experiences. It is a space from which to start considering questions about a community of experience and whether being a part of that community fosters a sense of belonging. An initial focus on attending to the conditions for pedagogy then enables teachers to move toward more academically oriented pedagogy and measures of success. An important finding from this research site is that alternative measures of success as defined by academic literature and mainstream education programs is lacking. Disenfranchised urban youth need greater flexibility in areas such as attendance, coming to school on time, and homework completion. Students' own definitions of success would be an important component of addressing this lack. Also important to consider is success defined as praxis. Youth who are empowered to make informed choices about their lives and community need to be considered as successful.

Ultimately teachers need to move students in this environment toward a critical literacy involving an analysis based on significant engagement with their experiences. This necessarily includes experiences of being labeled, both past and present, and the ways in which these experiences have informed their subjectivities. Critical literacy in this context also needs to include teachers' and youth workers' own examinations of the "normal" educational practice of the broader context of public schooling in Alberta and how their efforts to disrupt are limited by systemic constraints. Literacy needs to be recognized as political as much at ICHS as in the public school system and as such needs to be a part of the development of critical approaches. What literacy is developed, by whom, and for what purpose, are questions brought into discussions. Historical

consciousness is crucial. Toward this end, there are many texts, written, visual, and oral, that can be used to frame discussions. Examples of community action for social change also contribute to a forum for discussion around praxis and the transference or sharing of power.

Chapter 8: Conclusions (the story speaks)

> Knowledge of self is more like ignorance than knowledge. The more deeply I go, the less clear my self-knowledge becomes, the more ambiguities and perplexities and unresolved contradictions I discover (Novak, 1978, p. 43).

The writing of this dissertation has been a process of discovery for me. While I have learned a great deal about Inner City High School and the people who form its community, I have also learned much about myself, in relation to the school, its population and practices. I have enriched my understandings of research method and interpretation by examining my role as a member of the school community, both as teacher and researcher. I have also developed a critical awareness of my own assumptions and beliefs about young people, schooling and society. These understandings develop out of a lengthy process of involvement with the school. My first introduction to ICHS led me into relevant study, reading, and reflection. This process does not end and so what I offer here is a moment in time. It represents the meanings I currently hold about a constantly evolving system operating in a complex environment. In this final chapter I will highlight the important understandings that I feel have something to offer to other schools (and the school of this study) who are working with similar populations and to mainstream schools in the hope of finding better ways to engage youth whose needs are currently unmet within public school systems. In the later part of the chapter I will explicate the ways in which this study can inform broader sociological discussions in the education realm.

Process of Discovery

This research has adopted a methodological process that allows for a deep listening to the data, the literature, and my personal reflections in ways represented by a "mediated reflexive view" (Dillabough, Wang & Kennelly, 2005, p.81). My fear at the outset of this project was that I would be bound to a theoretical and methodological framework that would shape my interpretations in ways that were arbitrated by the theory. That is, I did not want to insert my data into a ready-made framework. I wanted the research to speak for itself. Hermeneutics provides for such an analysis. D.G. Smith (1991) reminds us that good interpretive research is not found "in the degree to which it follows a specified methodological agenda, but in the degree to which it can show understanding of what it is that is being investigated" (p. 201). Engagement in a hermeneutical process taught me that *process* is important. Phases of research begin to be seen as somewhat arbitrary. There is no clear dividing line that represents the end of data collection, the beginning of analysis, and the writing up of findings. The process of writing for me was part of the discovery or data collection and analysis phases. The process was integrated from beginning to end. While the outcomes are clearly my own, that is they speak from who I am and others would surely offer a different perspective, it is my desire like Wiltse (2005) "that it is me, me saying something, that is essential" (p.240). This is what is important about this research process.

An understanding of interpretive research as outlined above evolved out of engagement in the process. That is, I did not enter into this project with a clear understanding but rather it emerged for me through critical pursuit. Significantly, my decision to include my voice as a conversation with myself through hermeneutical action research highlighted the importance of being a part of the story. From the vantage point

of immersion in the research I made informed decisions regarding how to tell the story. Rather than suggesting the story was about "them" it had now become our story. This positioning provided greater security from which to speak, particularly where my constructions of events might have cast teachers and/or youth workers in a negative light. Understanding that my own practices reflected much of what they were doing made it seem less critical and ultimately more comfortable to me. It allowed me to take responsibility for changing myself within this context. Wiltse (2005) identifies a lack of embeddedness as one of the cracks in her research and suggests "the research design should allow space for new ways of learning and teaching to emerge" (p. 241). Co-creation of meaning emerged in my research through ongoing discussions and involvement with school participants and university colleagues. A hermeneutical action research methodology allowed me to develop understandings of my own prejudices related to teaching and research with a population of disenfranchised youth. It helped me to connect my prior experiences to the wisdom found in both written texts and the words of the research participants.

A question that remains for me is, did I do what I set out to do? Did I create a space for new ways of learning and teaching to emerge? Have I captured the essence of a hermeneutical analysis? D.G. Smith (1991) suggests inquiry has the "character of a dialogical messing about" (p. 198). Certainly the idea of messing about makes it difficult to establish whether one has engaged effectively. An attractive feature of theoretical frameworks that allow for putting all the pieces together succinctly is that it can be readily seen if the parts fit together well. Where there are no clearly defined boundaries to the inquiry there is a reliance on informed judgment to guide the way. Smith outlines a

number of requirements that shed light on the process beginning with a "deep attentiveness to language itself" (p. 199) and what the words point to historically. It is this historical aspect that provides the greatest difficulty for me. A brief nod to the literature certainly doesn't suggest genuine historical consciousness but rather an awareness of how historical conditions can and do affect individual people in this time and place. A rewriting of history certainly wasn't my project here but how can we speak about events in the here and now when historical facts are so disputed? Deeper understanding may involve more discussion with research participants regarding their personal and family histories and the ways in which they derive historical meaning.

A second requirement for hermeneutical inquiry is in the taking up of the project for oneself and in developing awareness of how we interpret details (D.G. Smith, 1991). It involves an ongoing struggle to understand our macro and micro frames and how we have been influenced by the discourses of which we are a part. For me, critical theory has continued to inform my beliefs in the historical and structural processes of social change that mediate the lives of disenfranchised urban youth. These "contemporary expressive forms" are "tied to a materially informed analysis that seeks to expose its stratified, historical and symbolic character" (Dillabough, Wang, & Kennelly, 2005, p. 81). This research project involving ICHS has demonstrated the importance of informing a sociological analysis with the micro dimensions of youths' lives. Engagement in a critical process with youth has helped me as educator to develop awareness of my own positioning in relation to an inner city schooling context and the ways in which my own power and privilege impacts my relationships both within and outside the school. ICHS provided an appropriate site within which multiple conversations could occur through a

unique approach to teaching a specialized high needs population. Relationships that are new and different inform a larger discussion around meeting the needs of students who are currently experiencing difficulties in public school environments.

There are many layers to this analysis. Critical theory provides a starting point for a theoretical design that includes the complexity of social divisions. In this research these social divisions include class, "race," and gender. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather representative of current literature on disenfranchised urban youth. The ways in which we can interpret a group of people are limited only by our imaginations or by our lack of dialogue with others. Careful interpretation "is a creative act on the side of sharpening identity within the play of differences" (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 199). It is learning to highlight the interconnectedness of various texts within our lives and discovering that dominant discourses are not simply common sense.

A third aspect of hermeneutics is that it is "not really concerned with hermeneutics per se" but rather with an overall interest in finding ourselves (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 200). This in itself is an important point of self-discovery. Throughout much of the writing of this dissertation I wondered if I were *doing* hermeneutics properly. Had I engaged in the proper steps in order to make sense of my place in the research? This self-doubt is indicative of a lack of understanding of hermeneutics. I now realize that my role is to demonstrate understanding of ICHS from within, to find myself "in the middle of stories" (p. 201) and to represent those stories in multidimensional fashion. My responsibility in hermeneutical engagement is in taking up the task.

Taking up the task of hermeneutics though implies we are "creating meaning, not simply reporting it" (D.G. Smith, 1991, p. 201). It is an understanding that we cannot

give an account of other people's thoughts and actions from their point of view. We can only interpret from within dialogue made possible by our common language and experience. Whatever I say about my research participants I am also saying about myself. This aspect I have tried to carefully attend to and it is this attentiveness that has led me to deeper understandings of myself and the processes of practice at the school of my study. The detail provided by this interpretive process articulates a richer vision of the lives of disenfranchised urban youth and those who struggle to ensure their place in a community that would otherwise exclude them. The story created illuminates a group of people who need to be noticed, not just for their own sake, but for all of us. Their story informs a missing piece of the educational puzzle, a piece many of us are struggling to find.

Whether or not I have told the story the way you might have, I have put the story out there so we can begin to dialogue. We can begin to talk about what works and what doesn't in terms of schooling practices for disenfranchised urban youth. We can talk about ways in which we can engage with youth as active subjects within a dominant objectifying educational discourse by beginning to validate students' knowledge and experience. We can refocus on the processes of education with attention to ensuring the pre-conditions for learning are attended to. And we can begin to dialogue about the need to raise the profile of schools that are struggling to meet the needs of disenfranchised urban youth in order to ensure adequate funding is in place and teachers' needs for adequate working conditions are met. Additionally, this interpretive framework offers a process for school-based researchers to enrich understandings of other research contexts. The connections between youths' experiences in schools (both public and alternative), my own experiences as teacher and researcher at ICHS, and an interpretive process

informed by sociology of education literature infused with understandings of poverty, "race," and gender, provide a framework that informs theory on disenfranchised urban youth and schooling.

Framing the Story – What the Frame has to Offer

I began the earlier chapter on framing the story with an understanding that accommodations had to be made in order to bring students to a space where formal learning can occur. Over the course of writing this dissertation my understandings of these processes evolved mostly due to my involvement in two significant events. The first was the co-authoring and presenting of a paper on ICHS at a National Mental Health conference. The paper was co-authored with one of the youth workers at ICHS and was on the topic of special needs funding. Discussions regarding this paper helped clarify an ongoing process of involvement with disenfranchised urban youth that is integral to building trust and moving toward goals of academic success. The second event was a critical pedagogy symposium held at ICHS in November 2005 that featured Ira Shor working with school staff, students, and members of the university and community agencies. Involvement in this event meant opportunities for discussion with Ira Shor who identified the process of accommodations as creating the conditions for pedagogy. This framing of the process offered another way to look at it. Accommodate doesn't get at what is important here. To accommodate is to adapt and while there are adaptations being made, this notion does not get at the complexity of the underlying issues. Creating the conditions for pedagogy suggests the need to attend to this complexity before classroom

learning can occur. I offer enhancement of this understanding with the knowledge that pedagogy does occur simultaneously even at the early stages of the program.

Findings from this study concur with earlier work that suggests flexibility is an essential consideration in creating the conditions for pedagogy. Early service teachers struggle to find a balance between flexibility, fairness, and meeting the requirements of the Alberta curriculum and student financing. In this teaching environment many chances need to be given when young people have so many struggles in their day-to-day lives. Attending school is often difficult for reasons ranging from lack of bus fare to justice system involvement. Without stable home lives these youth are not able to focus on or complete homework. Yet at the same time, staff work toward ensuring youth are ready to move forward with their lives by the time they complete their high school program. This includes an understanding that further schooling and jobs require regular attendance and completing work in a timely manner. This ongoing tension in the program is apparent in daily teaching practice as teachers and youth workers try to weigh individual needs with larger group concerns. Learning to live with uncertainty, informed by self-examination of one's own values about classroom practice, seems to be what separates the early service teachers from the more experienced staff members on this issue. Part of this process for teachers involves a reframing of poverty as an issue of psychological pressures faced by youth. Exclusion and subsequent identification with other disenfranchised youth operates within material and social conditions that reflect a pathologized view of inner city life. Living in these socioeconomic conditions and feeling the rejection of others is particularly difficult for adolescents as they come to understand themselves.

For me, many of these understandings came about through not only teaching within this environment but also with accompanied graduate level study. Wiltse (2005) echoes this sentiment in her own graduate level retroactive reflections on her teaching practice. What is made explicit is the point that teachers often do not learn about matters such as, in this case the understandings and practices appropriate for disenfranchised youth, unless they become graduate students. Even the practice of informal reflection on teaching was made much more clear for me in my graduate program. Complicating lack of awareness is the need for practicing teachers to enter into such discussions willingly. Senior school staff members at ICHS report resistance to such topics as lay outside those formally addressed by teacher education programs. It seems to me that teacher preparation programs need to be informed by the needs of not only alternative schools, but also those students whose needs are not being met within the public system. This study points to the need to include the psychology of poverty informed by historical processes of "race," and gender; critical and feminist pedagogical approaches; and, action research as reflective practice. While some of these topics are given a cursory treatment within teacher preparation, clearly this is not enough. A much more integrated approach is necessary including the modeling of alternative pedagogies, highlighting examples such as ICHS.

An important contribution of this study lies within my developed understandings of the meaning and practice of respect. The notion of respect has always been elusive for me. The word respect is thrown around a lot in discussions regarding educational practice, but what does it really mean? How do we measure and validate respect as an essential element of research and teaching? I have come to understand respect, through

involvement in this study, as something that is felt. In what ways might "felt" respect inform research within educational contexts and classroom practices for teachers? How do we know when co-participants feel equality in the research process? Should feelings of being respected inform our teaching practice? Clearly the youth in this study indicate lack of respect as contributing to early school leaving and current awareness of being respected as factors in their ICHS success. An illumination of an empathetic approach that considers others' feelings of respect would go along way toward helping the youth of this study stay in school.

Desires youth hold for educational attainment linked to workplace and economic success are informed by their beliefs, sustained by involvement in public schooling, that their futures are limited in relation to peers and the material and social constraints of contemporary school and inner city life. Over time, they come to blame these constraints on their own lack of effort with little consciousness of historical cultural materialism and contemporary schooling processes that serve to push them to the margins. Any power they hold to resist this marginalization is exercised such that it serves to expedite rather than hinder the process. Here too is a tension engaged in daily at ICHS. Reshaping young people's values to be more conducive to academic success requires a devaluing of the street knowledge they have developed for survival. Initially the school's literacy program builds upon this street knowledge to develop confidence and critical awareness, albeit with some resistance of what it means to be non-judgmental. However, the attitudes and behaviors needed for longer-term academic success in a broader context, are in contrast to the knowledge disenfranchised urban youth possess. While it is clearly necessary to value youths' experiences it is equally necessary to question the knowledge currently

valued in public schools. A critical practice opens up possibilities for such questioning to occur.

The ongoing discussion, reflected in educational literature, regarding integrated versus segregated school programs for specific groups who are disenfranchised, who feel their voices aren't heard in public schools, also figures prominently in this study. Clearly there are many arguments to support a number of different approaches. I wish through this research to contribute to the ongoing conversation. Specifically, this study suggests the educational needs of disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth can be met in integrated settings when we focus on relationships built on respect and understanding. My personal belief is that there is room for many initiatives and a variety of school practices. Certainly ongoing study into discovery of common elements that are working well, working marginally well, or not working at all would contribute significantly to this body of literature. This is an area for further research. As this study shows, disenfranchised urban youth, particularly Aboriginal youth who have had some experience in a variety of school contexts have much to offer to the discussion. They need to be a part of continuing dialogue. Others need to be part of this discussion as well, including teachers, youth workers, and elders.

Unraveling New Understandings

A process of unraveling the tensions of programming at ICHS has been primarily about my own hermeneutical learning. I have been challenged in this undertaking to examine my own taken for granted assumptions, what I knew to be true for me at the outset did not hold up to layers of analysis. Engaging in conversation with a PhD

colleague through the course of writing a paper together is highlighted as an important component of adding layers or new perspectives to the interpretive process. I have strengthened my convictions in the need to enter into dialogue regarding educational issues that are uncomfortable for me. Knowing that we cannot understand another person in advance but only in relation *to us* aids in reducing essentialisms.

Specifically this learning contributes to ongoing dialogue, the idea that comfort as a space eludes many disenfranchised urban youth, particularly when involved in public school settings. Additionally, comfort evades many of us but offers openings or cracks that allow the light to get in (Wiltse, 2005). Maybe discomfort is not something to avoid but rather something that needs to be embraced. When youth find places of comfort are they in part spaces where discomfort can be avoided? Are they simply places where youth have found belonging? The idea of being pushed to the margins offers new understandings to me. Many of us as researchers and teachers look for comfort and acceptance in mainstream schools and practices. These are the places that are held in high regard, the best jobs are in middle class schools and the most prestigious journals are mainstream. Maybe we need to look for comfort in the margins. We need to challenge ourselves to embrace discomfort in order to achieve something better for schools. Young people's complex sense of themselves and their place in a stratified socio-cultural society is informed by beliefs of where they belong in relation to others, beliefs expounded upon through uncomfortable experiences with the educational and social systems that have had an impact on them and other disenfranchised youth who are their peers.

An important insight illuminated by this writing is in its contribution to literature on youth subjectivities. Nicholson and Seidman (1995) in response to critiques of the

naturalizing tendencies inherent in categories of identity, demonstrate a "focus on institutions as well as texts, to think about the interrelations of social patterns without being essentializing or totalizing" (p. 9). This dissertation offers a practical example of this empirical process. Furthermore, it demonstrates the "interrelationship between all three inequality forms" of social class, gender and race/ethnicity (P. Hall, 2001, p. 238). Arguably there are other important categories of inequality that deserve attention but as an organizing framework this study testifies to a commitment to the complexity of young people's lives and enlightens significant aspects of their educational needs.

Specifically, the ways in which disenfranchised urban youth construct their subjectivities relationally in public schools are vital to their processes of leaving those schools. The youth in this study clearly understand their places in the margins through the ways in which they were treated by teachers and peers. This study also informs literature of an assumed understanding of White privilege as incorporating middle class status. Privilege is not a concept that applies to disenfranchised urban youth when material and social disadvantage are understood. Similarly, notions of gender are made more complex in this context. While there are general differences in the experiences of disenfranchised males and females, all are affected by the conditions of their difficult social environments.

Tensions of Pedagogy Revealed

Tensions inherent in educational programming at ICHS are instructive for a broader audience of educators. The need for labels within large educational systems is illustrated in the dilemma posed by questions regarding special needs funding. Labels

allow for average, easily identified and applied treatments by reducing time consuming and expensive attention to complexity. Difficulties arise out of the naturalizing quality of labels to ascribe group characteristics. Nicholson and Seidman (1995) discussing Young's work, suggest we need group labels to avoid "social analyses which are not merely accounts of individual intentions" (p. 9). Labels come to serve a productive purpose as reflected in the understandings of early service ICHS teachers in relation to disenfranchised youth. Characteristics attributed to these youth through mainstream practices such as teacher preparation programs focus our attention on abstractions rather than individuals. In so doing, we fail to comprehend the realities of street life and the impact these experiences have on youth in public schools. In some respects we need labels, yet labels cause difficulties in their tendency to normalize. A way around this dilemma is recognition that "particular categories of identity must be understood within the context of a given historical setting" (p. 22) and that categories and patterns of identity are always fluid. Moving discussions such as this into teacher preparation is an area for further study.

ICHS teachers and youth workers have through time and engaged involvement with youth, developed a knowledge of disenfranchisement that encourages them to shift away from objectifying discourses toward more individualizing approaches. Critical pedagogical practices operate within a dominant framework in ways that require continuous struggle to maintain hold of a vision of inclusive schooling that meets the personal needs of their students while also conforming to the institutional requirements of education in Alberta. My own learning in this context reveals an important role for teacher preparation and ongoing in-service training. Knowledge construction for teachers

needs to be built around the importance of process and the tensions revealed through pedagogies of social inclusion versus pedagogies reflective of neo-liberal reforms of education.

Importance of process informs discussions of success, as well, given the overwhelming appreciation within secondary education, of high school completion as the measure. Within a community of experience, such as reflected by the ICHS student population, youths' personal accounts of exclusion, and undeniable social and economic difficulties, success is measured slowly and incrementally. Students' own definitions of success through the development of a praxis that enables them to act within their communities would inform broader discussions of success within educational contexts. An important component of a process of success as demonstrated throughout this critical account of ICHS is the development of a critical literacy to challenge and include the voices of disenfranchised urban youth. Current literacy practices at ICHS need to be highlighted by further research. Literacy is a key consideration when addressing the needs of this population of youth. Successes in this area can inform educational policy and practice in a wider context.

Contributions to Sociology of Education

In this final section I shift the focus of discussion from micro to macro analysis illuminating the contributions of this study to broader theoretical debate. Ball (2004) elucidates a "sociology of education is made up of a set of dynamic and located constructions" (p. 1). Given that the field has "disparate, nationally located histories and styles of sociology" (p. 1) the understandings developed through this critical literacy of

ICHS inform theory of this time and place and grow out of unique historical conditions that focus a missing piece on interactions with broader discussions. I wish to push the boundaries of constructions of the social to include a group of disenfranchised youth who constitute a "discourse community" (p. 1) that has yet to be heard.

Significantly this contribution engages with the tensions and disputes, within the sociology of education, of valid research forms. Within multiple traditions of the sociology of education, the empirical-analytic tradition remains dominant despite ongoing criticisms of its attempts to equate the social world with the natural world. In both the US and UK there has been a recent resurgence of interest in this type of practice particularly in response to calls for research to provide evidence for use in policy development (Ball, 2004). Methods represented as educational sociology, that seek objectivity through "fact-like conclusions and law-like generalizations about human behavior and social interaction" (p. 3) abound. Focusing on the relationships between social origins and educational attainment these methods are unable to account for the *processes* of educating. In the context of this study, these methods can tell us these youth are falling through the cracks, a fact that has been painfully clear for years. What they are less capable of elucidating are approaches directed at solving the problem. Evidence-based, objective approaches have led us to seek all encompassing answers to educational ills, but like Battiste and Henderson (2000) make clear "there is no cure-all, no educational antibiotic, that can be injected into the state from the outside" (p. 92).

A turn toward the new sociology of education has been evidenced since the 1970s that focuses on the processes of education that are reflected in a dual commitment to realism and constructivism (Ball, 2004). That is "the discovery and representation of

respondents' meanings" is coupled with "the idea that social actors are active interpreters of the social world" (p. 5). This study demonstrates the importance of developing deep familiarity with the sphere of life *within* the research environment ultimately providing support for a particular qualitative research that relies on social agency, cultural mediation and reflexivity to inform interpretation. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and hermeneutic reflection on personal teaching practice research participants enter discussions as active subjects who contribute to a knowledge building process. An interpretive account such as demonstrated in this dissertation also represents a turn in social science that questions the very meaningfulness of the discipline. Without certainty, how can we inform? What we are searching for now are the bright spots that can illuminate an understanding that speaks through us about society and culture. We learn about ourselves as contributors to the construction of a social world of which we are a part. We learn about ourselves through interactions within a microcosm that then informs participation in a macro sociological discourse.

Noting the significant changes in the life experiences of young people in industrialized societies in recent decades, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest we have entered a new period of post-modernism involving a much more diverse set of lifestyles reflecting far reaching implications of socioeconomic change. Expressing skepticism of many post-modern theories these authors suggest life chances and experiences are still largely shaped by an individual's location within social structures. However, these structures "tend to become increasingly obscure as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify" (p. 2). Structures such as class, "race," and gender militate against young people's chances even while they "come to regard the social world as

unpredictable and filled with risks which can only be negotiated on an individual level" (p. 2). The changing impact of these social structures on disenfranchised urban youth is highlighted by this study.

Beck (cited in Furlong & Cartmel, 1997) suggests that risks such as those posed by the unpredictability of post-industrial society, and needing to be negotiated in day-to-day life, are unequally distributed in society. A risk society tends to strengthen social class structures with greater risks adhering to those at the bottom. Furlong and Cartmel clarify that "while social inequality continues to exert a powerful hold over people's lives" it operates increasingly "at the level of the individual rather than the group or class" (p. 4). People increasingly regard setbacks and crises as individual shortcomings with little recognition of societal processes outside of their control. The young people at ICHS reflect this understanding in their acceptance of responsibility for lack of high school completion. Individual subjectivities come to be informed by reflection on a diversity of experiences operating within an educational system and labor market that does not allow them the same opportunities as those of other socioeconomic classes. New regimes of standardization in schools tends to blur integrated social class, racial, and gender differences by giving the impression of greater equality and opportunities for individual advancement without actually doing so.

While these authors acknowledge gender and racial inequalities as coming to assume greater significance in a risk society, how do these social processes operate for youth living in poverty? Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue collective identities have weakened. To this understanding of modernity in an inner city context I would clarify that *traditional* collective identities have weakened. That is, for this group of youth,

collective identity is no longer established along racial, neighborhood, or social class lines. Rather collective identity is based on a community of experience. It is an experience of disenfranchisement reflexively created by involvement in a variety of experiences informed by a turn to a society of risk and by the continuation of social structures that make participation difficult. Within that community of experience, young people who have internalized an understanding of personal responsibility through school, social and justice system involvement, develop "allegiances as representing pragmatic responses by individuals in the struggle for survival in the risk society" (p. 4).

In this context however, the allegiance comes to represent necessity rather than pragmatism in a struggle for survival that is objectively realized through daily street involvement. In a subjective sense, class positions may have weakened but choices are severely limited for those at the bottom. An illusion of equality in schools gives way to a clear picture of inequality through the lens of analysis, yet youth remain shaped by the messages they have internalized. Individuals are increasingly held accountable for their own fates, a value "constantly reinforced by the school and the media" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 8). Changes in educational credentialing and labor market opportunities for youth who have been marginalized mean less possibility for individual action.

S. Hall (1996b) furthers this discussion in relation to collective identities by noting the "extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'" (p. 443). S. Hall notes that categories are politically and culturally constructed and as such necessitate an understanding of diversity within. This certainly holds true for the subject positions of the young people whose voices are given consideration by this study. Within a community of experience

reflective of the material and social positions of disenfranchisement there are categories, such as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal that reflect a commonality of constructed meaning as well as individual identities informed by unique circumstances. What comes into play is "recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience" of particular subjects (p. 443).

If we are to mobilize subject positions in schools in order to enact praxis it is essential to construct difference into "forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible" (S. Hall, 1996b, p. 444) within an understanding of boundaries as fluid rather than fixed. Representations of disenfranchisement necessitate dimensional layers that include class, "race," gender, sexual orientation, and geographical location. We are directed toward a re-conceptualizing of the concept of difference. This re-conceptualizing needs to be informed from a location within a continuous struggle for informed representation but then is "able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes" (p. 448).

Contributions to Critical Pedagogy Literature

Within schools then our efforts must develop a "*critical* literacy, *powerful* literacy, *political* literacy which enables the growth of genuine understanding and control of all of the spheres of social life in which we participate" (Apple, 2004b, p. 179). Literacy is not simply an economically driven skill but rather a moral vision of knowledge and culture. Disenfranchised urban youth are leaving our public schools with low levels of a literacy that represents domination and exploitation by those mainstream practices, both market and knowledge driven, which marginalized and excluded them.

Literacy for them necessitates the construction of a sense of reality in which they are central rather than a pedagogic practice whereby "present class inequalities are likely to be reproduced" (Bernstein, 2004, p. 196).

Discussions of text are instructive to further research particularly in light of class assumptions and their relationship to "modalities of pedagogic practices" (Bernstein, 2004, p. 214) illuminated by Gore (1993) as "the pedagogies argued for and the pedagogies of arguments made" (p. 127). Feminist or critical pedagogies require "a detailed analysis of the specific practices which actualize the power relations of the pedagogy regime" (p. 127). In relation to class and gender analyses attention is focused on "social relations in situated contextualized practices" (Arnot, 2001, p. 132). Additionally, most research to date, focused on texts, has "remained largely unconcerned with the politics of culture" (Apple, 2004b, p. 180). Knowledge that is socially legitimate in schools is increasingly understood to reflect larger society. The emerging field of urban literacy highlights the immersion of disenfranchised youth in particular electronic media forms to a much greater extent than their involvement in traditional reading and writing literacies. Urban youth are the highest users of electronic media (i.e. television, movies, video games) suggesting these students could benefit from a literacy pedagogy that empowers them to "deconstruct dominant media narratives, develop much-needed academic and critical literacies and create their own counter-narratives" (Duncan-Andrade, 2006). The literacy program at ICHS offers the possibility to examine social relations in an under examined context and as such has a contribution to make to ongoing scholarship on literacy.

While literacy practices at ICHS offer illumination on ways to begin creating texts that signify emerging power and possibilities for praxis, transformation of authority and control are difficult endeavors. The power implicit in classroom texts and curriculum, while representing dominant beliefs, also contains contradictions including elements of non-dominant cultural group practices. Meanings within texts are "multiple and contradictory" necessitating an interpretation of our own readings (Apple, 2004b, p. 191). A reflective hermeneutics of what is taught and what is not taught about any given text informs understanding, as does knowledge of what students' bring to the reading. Here again is an area for further study. At ICHS, the critical literacy program offers effective initiatives for creating new texts and re-reading of existing texts. The ways in which teachers mediate and transform constructions of these texts is a crucial element of practice that would be clarified by additional research. These understandings, while informing practice in an alternative school context could also inform teacher preparation program responses to teaching students who experience difficult material and social realities.

As educational qualification increasingly becomes the "condition for legitimate access to a growing number of positions, particularly the dominant ones, the educational system tends increasingly to dispossess" those who are lacking power and privilege (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 26). When critiques of power point to the ways in which reproduction of privilege is legitimized, a resurgent response incorporates new institutionalized mechanisms designed to disguise these processes. The educational system tends to increase and unify "the market in social qualifications which gives rights to occupy rare positions" (p. 26). Within the scope of this study we have seen how processes of school

choice, implemented in response to calls for de-streaming, operate to provide the best chances to those who are materially capable of exercising those choices while those who are disenfranchised are ultimately pushed out of mainstream schools. The language of "choice" effectively disguises and legitimizes this reproduction strategy.

A critical literacy, as a critique of power, struggles to disrupt this process but must remain vigilant to continual engagement in order to counter these naturalizing tendencies. Additionally, disenfranchised youth have been pathologized "through schooling by representing the children of the poor only as a measure of what they lack" (Reay, 2004, p. 34). Naturalizing tendencies are thus justified by the development of a portrayal of marginalized groups as lacking the necessary qualities to occupy rare positions. The youth in this study reflect a desire for the material benefits an education can provide yet remain alienated from this possibility within a public school context. A critical literacy can bring awareness to this discontinuity, a narrative that espouses academic achievement as a universal public good but does not allow it to happen for disenfranchised youth. Ultimately, a critical literacy moves beyond a schooling that leads to the acquisition of power and material wealth to questions of what constitutes a public good.

Hermeneutical action research, as employed in this study, informs critical pedagogy literature by offering a way to come to understanding of the interpretations we bring to readings of texts in a way that "conceptualizes pedagogy as an interpretive event" (Salvio, 1997, p. 248). It is in coming to know ourselves through an interpretation of our own pedagogical practice. As D.G. Smith (1991) reminds us our practices need to be mediated linguistically "to ensure there is a genuine meeting of the different horizons of our understanding" (p. 197). Through this study I have demonstrated how my reality as

a teacher at ICHS is arrived at relationally in my interactions with students and staff members. My practice is informed by an understanding of their lived realities, arrived at dialogically. In this way, hermeneutical action research offers a way for teachers to ensure critical practice avoids the trap of shaping the social order in a fixed direction.

A hermeneutical action research in relation to my teaching practice allowed insight to emerge for me in relation to the tensions inherent in pedagogical practice at ICHS. An interpretive reading of pedagogy reveals our own complicity in the maintenance of social categories through enactment of our own power positions. Reality for us opens up within an articulation of whole and part informing teaching practices as necessarily informed by relations with those we teach. There is a profoundly heightened ethical sense to relations when we are teaching disenfranchised urban youth who have been denied a place in mainstream schools. Without a sharing of "truths" between us there can be no common shared reality from which to engage. This engagement is crucial to a critical pedagogy.

This study has demonstrated a hermeneutical critical theoretical process of understanding the educational experiences of a group of disenfranchised urban youth. Contributions to a new sociology of education reflect reconfigured processes of structure and culture that recognize macro analyses of materiality, both historical and contemporary, that shape the subjectivities youth construct about their social position and the complex and varied ways these youth respond to their experiences. Theory is additionally informed by an openness to risking our preconceived notions in dialogical encounters with others thereby reshaping and reinterpreting prior understandings of ourselves as educators and researchers as well as those who have been marginalized by a

dominant educational system. For me, relationships formed through research and teaching at ICHS have illuminated the complex and diverse ways in which young people understand themselves in this context as well as the many ways in which teaching is complexified for those who attempt to disrupt dominant discourses about schooling and risk.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Sample interview questions for students

1. I would like to begin by talking about your experiences in public schools. What stands out in your mind when you think about your public school experiences? What did you like/dislike about school?

2. What experiences led to your leaving the public school system?

3. Why did you enroll at Inner City High School (ICHS)?

4. How long have you been at ICHS? What is the school like? How is it different from other schools you have attended? How is it similar to other schools you have attended? Do you like it here and why?

5. Tell me how the program works. What do you like/dislike about the program at ICHS? How could the program change to help you become more successful in school?

Sample interview questions for staff

1. How is ICHS different from other schools? How is it similar to other schools? What practices work well for this population of students? What else could be done to facilitate student learning in this environment? How should we measure student success?

2. What have been your experiences as a teacher/youth worker in this school? Tell me some stories about challenges or highlights you have experienced.

3. What are the differences/similarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in relation to learning and academic achievement?

Appendix B: Letter to Participants and Consent FORM

March 22, 2004

Dear

I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in the Faculty of Education. As part of my doctoral program I am conducting a research project at Inner City High School (ICHS). The purpose of my study is to develop an understanding of the workings (both theory and practice) of ICHS as an example of a school designed to meet the needs of students who have left the public school system and have since decided to enroll in an alternative schooling program. I am inviting both students and staff at ICHS to participate in this study and would welcome your involvement.

I will be in the school for approximately two months to collect my data. During this time I plan to attend circles and staff meetings. I will also be asking for participants for focus group discussions and some individual interviews. Participants would be asked to attend 1-2 focus groups and possibly 1-2 interviews. Participation is on a voluntary basis. Confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants and data will be respected. Each focus group or interview will last about one hour.

I plan to use a tape recorder and take notes at both focus group discussions and interviews where all participants are agreeable to being recorded. The research project will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Should anyone other than myself be involved in the research (e.g. transcribers) they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. This research is being undertaken because it has the potential to inform educational practices that could benefit students who have left school prior to completion and wish to return to a high school program. Your participation can contribute to the building of knowledge related to alternative schooling programs. Research participants will not be subjected to risk of harm as a result of involvement in this research.

Once I have compiled synopses from the focus group discussions and interviews I will return them to the participants for verification. You will have the opportunity at that time to change or remove any statements you have made. Participants have the right to not participate in any portion of the research or withdraw completely at any time. Any data collected can be withdrawn from the database. The researcher will store the data, for a time period of five years, following the completion of the study. As well as being used for my doctoral research, it may also be used for research articles, book chapters, teaching, or presentations. In these contexts, data will also be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards.

Should you have any concerns about this research at any time please contact my program supervisor, Dr. Alison Taylor, at 496-7608 or Dr. Gerald Taylor (Graduate Coordinator) at 492-0765.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at 492-3751.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Diane Wishart Leard

I, _____, consent to participation in the study outlined above.
(print name)

_____ _____
(signature) (date)